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Piero Karasu
Illustration by
Yuri Kisaragi
The Magical Revolution of the Reincarnated Princess and the Genius Young Lady

Euphyllia Magenta
The daughter of Duke Magenta. After the annulment of her betrothal, she joined Anisphia to live in the princess's villa.
Anisphia Wynn Palettia
First Princess of the Kingdom of Palettia. Though her free-spirited ways have earned her the title of Princess Peculiar, with Euphyllia's help, she succeeded in repelling the attacking dragon that threatened the kingdom.
The Magical Revolution of the Reincarnated Princess and the Genius Young Lady
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I hope Miss Lainie is all right...
"...Am I a vampire?"
"Mystic eyes, maybe? If you wanted to charm someone, that would be the most effective way to do it."
Ilia Coral
Anisphia's personal maid. She was saved by Anisphia in the past and is deeply loyal to her.
Tilty Claret
The eldest daughter of the powerful Marquis Claret. She has withdrawn to a private residence, where she studies curses. Occasionally she conducts joint research with Anisphia, but they have a complicated relationship because of their different beliefs.
Lainie Cyan
The daughter of a commoner elevated to the rank of baron. She was at the heart of Euphyllia's betrothal being called off, and now she's been exposed as a vampire!

"Why do you like magic so much?"
"I guess I just do. It's that simple—I adore it. I bet falling in love feels similar."

"It's a curse, Sister."
"Allie, I have one question for you. What does magic mean to you?"

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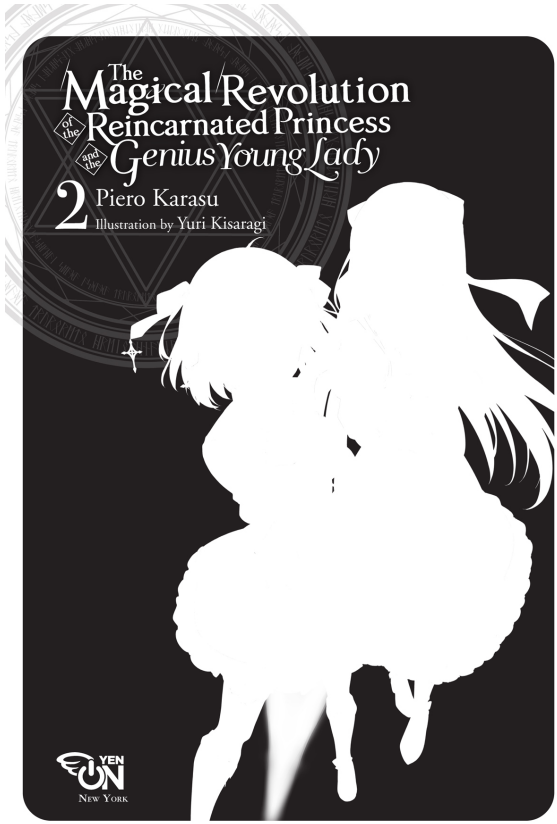
The Magical Revolution of the Reincarnated Princess and the Genius Young Lady
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Piero Karasu
Illustration by Yuri Kisaragi
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The Magical Revolution of the Reincarnated Princess and the Genius Young Lady 2

Piero Karasu

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The Story So Far

Princess Anisphia yearns for magic and yet cannot use it. Unable to give up on her dreams, she created a new field of scholarship known as magical science—magicology—to pursue her research. One day, her younger brother, Prince Algard, called off his engagement to his fiancée, Euphyllia, who Anisphia then invited to join her as a research assistant. As the two began getting used to life together in Anisphia's detached palace, Euphyllia's wounds started to mend—when out of nowhere, a dragon threatened the kingdom. The two young women rushed to the scene to subdue the rampaging creature, and their success became one of the realm's greatest triumphs—but the problem of Euphyllia's annulled engagement remains unresolved!

Piero Karasu
Illustration by Yuri Kisaragi

The Story So Far

I held my breath. I had to remain undetected from here on out. If anyone found me, my plan would be ruined. My heart was pounding in my chest.

I was hiding in one of the corridors of the royal palace. I had just escaped from my quarters and was en route to my destination. If I let anyone stumble upon me, I would undoubtedly be taken back to my room, so I had to be cautious.

My pulse was racing from the strain, but I leaned back against the wall, glancing around the corner of the corridor with the hand mirror that I had brought with me. After confirming that no one else was there, I quickly and silently approached the door, knocking softly so that no one but the person inside would hear me.

"…Who's there?"

My lips formed a smile as I heard that voice. I opened the door, quickly slid inside, and grinned at the child in the room.

"Let's play!" I exclaimed.

The young boy, meanwhile, stared back at me wide-eyed and sighed. "…Again? We'll both get in trouble, you know?" He frowned.

I simply ignored the warning and stepped into the center of the room.

"We're *always* getting told off anyway! Plus, I thought of a new experiment, so I need your help!"

"Another one…? Are you sure it will be all right this time?" The child stared back at me with suspicion, unsure how to respond.

But I couldn't retreat now. I gave him a confident nod before continuing. "Of course! This time will be a success for sure! In fact, I bet all our failures have been leading to this very moment!"

"…Really?" he responded, nonplussed.

He didn't find the suggestion particularly unpleasant, but he did seem rather resigned to his fate.

I held out a hand. "Let's go, Allie!"

…It was such a nostalgic dream.

* * *

"…A…dream?"

I blinked as I woke up, my eyes taking a moment to adjust to the light. In my half-awake, half-unconscious state, I could only vaguely remember what had happened in it.

It had been a nostalgic memory, from a time before Allie and I had fallen out. I had taken advantage of a break between my studies to sneak out from my room and do something fun with him.

Why am I thinking back on this now…?

As I reflected on how strange it was, I sat up, stretched my body, and stepped down from my bed. Next, I swapped my nightgown for my usual casual attire from the closet and sat down in front of the mirror to make myself look presentable.

"All right. This should do it."

With that done, I stepped out from my room, and my gaze met Ilia's. She had been on her way to see me; Euphie was standing behind her.

"Good morning, Your Highness."

"Lady Anis. Good morning."

"Morning, you two."

Some time had passed since Euphie had started living with me in this villa in the detached palace. She seemed to have gotten used to life here, as her mannerisms as she greeted me were impeccably natural. Seeing her now, I couldn't help but smile.

"Breakfast is ready. Please come to the dining room," Ilia said.

"Sure. Let's go, Euphie."

"Yes."

At Ilia's urging, we made our way to the dining room. I used to eat alone with Ilia here, but now Euphie was with us. Still, we didn't converse mid-meal. If we were going to talk, it would be after we had eaten.

As such, I didn't broach the subject until everyone had finished their morning repast.

"Euphie, Ilia. We're going out today, so be sure to get ready."

Euphie's eyes widened in astonishment before they shifted into a vacant expression. "…Going out? All of us?"

Ilia, by contrast, was remarkably calm. "It's rare for you to invite *me* along. And just where are you planning to take us?"

I nodded. “Yep, you too. We’re going to go see Tilty.”

“…Who’s Tilty?” Euphie inclined her head at the unfamiliar name.

I paused for a moment, unsure how best to describe the person I had in mind. “Well, it’s a bit difficult to explain, you know? I suppose she’s like…a bad friend? Someone I can’t quite get away from?”

“…Ahem,” Ilia interjected, throwing out a lifeline. “Do you know Marquis Claret, Lady Euphyllia?”

“Yes. Everyone’s heard of Marquis Claret.”

The House of Claret was one of the most powerful noble families in the Kingdom of Palettia. Its members were known for their steady, dependable policy-making and political influence, and therefore, few other noble families would be willing to make enemies of them.

The Claret family held a large marquisate commensurate with their position and was making vital contributions to the kingdom’s food self-sufficiency. They had a history of sharing their abundance of resources with other noble families during times of famine, and thanks to that, their voice in the kingdom’s affairs was a powerful one.

They also actively employed much of their large territory for animal husbandry, and many of their citizens worked together for this effort. As such, there were some who called Marquis Claret the custodian of the kingdom’s food supplies. They were neither too close nor too distant from the royal family, occupying a convenient neutral position.

“Tilty is Marquis Claret’s eldest daughter,” Ilia explained.

“…Huh? His eldest daughter…? You mean…?”

Euphie quickly realized the identity of the person we were going to meet, but she seemed mildly bewildered.

Although the Claret family was highly regarded in the kingdom, they had one major blemish to their reputation—their eldest daughter.

“The marquis’s shut-in daughter? I’ve heard she has a cruel personality, and her parents keep her inside so that she doesn’t go around wreaking havoc…” Euphie trailed off.

“Ah, right. That’s more or less it,” I answered.

“Are the rumors true?” Euphie asked with a frown.

The stories about Tilty were, to be frank, terrible. She was said

to be an impudent and cruel young noble who used magic to beat her servants and those who fell out of her favor, and she loved bloodshed more than anything else.

Marquis Claret usually resided in a mansion in the royal capital, but he kept his eldest daughter in a separate villa. Tilty was famously excluded from social gatherings.

Even now, people whispered about the cruelties she got up to in her social exile. According to rumors, the marquis was at a loss as to how to deal with her and had essentially locked her inside.

"Well, the rumors are true. I can think of a few stories from a while back," I said.

"From a while back…?"

"We've known each other for years. Although she nearly killed me when we first met."

"…She *what*?!" Euphie was clearly shocked by this. She stared at me, eyes full of suspicion for Tilty.

I waved a hand in front of my face. "Like I said, that was in the past! I had a proper reason for seeing her, and I did so knowing full well who she was. Besides, she really is just a plain old shut-in now. And she isn't really all that bloodthirsty… But it will probably be easier to understand what I mean once you meet her for yourself."

"…May I ask *why* exactly you want to meet such a person?"

"Lady Euphyllia," Ilia interjected. "Tilty Claret is a researcher for Her Highness's ether drug."

"She's a researcher?!"

"That's right," I answered. Tilty was a colleague of mine who had helped me create a potent tonic. "We've got a huge piece of dragon magicite now and plenty of new results to analyze, so I thought I could try something new. It'll be a good time to introduce you to her as well."

"…She isn't dangerous, is she?"

"Nope. Trust me."

"Those stories took place a long time ago," Ilia explained. "Now, thanks to the princess's help, Miss Tilty's symptoms have alleviated considerably."

"Her symptoms?" Euphie echoed dubiously.

Ilia nodded. "I believe Her Highness already mentioned how an excess of magical energy can bring about physical and mental abnormalities, did she not?"

"Yes…," Euphyllia answered. "Is that what happened to her?"

“Yep. Tilty is a perfect example,” I explained. “I’ve known her ever since I started examining her condition.”

“I see. So that’s the connection… And that’s why you’re so sure she isn’t dangerous?”

“When she uses too much magic, it upsets the balance of magical energy inside her body. But so long as she doesn’t use any, everything’s fine. That’s why she stays indoors—all the time.”

For the nobility of the Kingdom of Palettia, one’s aptitude for magic was fundamental to one’s rank and status. Because she couldn’t use magic, albeit for a different reason from mine, she was holed up in her villa, having broken all ties with society.

“She’s trustworthy and dependable. Despite a few personality issues…,” I said.

“…You mean even disregarding the illness?” Euphie asked.

“She’s rather like the princess in that regard,” Ilia commented.

“Ilia! That isn’t very fair!” I protested.

“Ah…I see.” Euphie nodded in understanding.

“Why are you acting like it all makes sense to you now?!”

I didn’t want to be lumped together with a girl who refused to ever leave her place! I might have been somewhat reclusive, but I still liked to venture outside! But complain as I might, neither Euphie nor Ilia paid me any heed. I hadn’t even accepted that analogy, you know?!

* * *

We made our way by carriage to a section of the royal capital lined with aristocratic residences and mansions for landed nobles who only stayed in the city for short periods. With the social season in full swing, they were all swarming the place.

Marquis Claret’s villa was located on the outskirts of this aristocratic district, in an area that received little sunlight. The entire mansion left a dim impression, as expected for a residence perpetually bathed in shade. The courtyard was minimally maintained. The whole place was dark and eerie.

I had been here more times than I could count, but all the same, I couldn’t help thinking that the external gloom perfectly reflected its primary occupant.

“Is this the place…?” Euphie asked, evidently confused.

Ilia followed behind us, accustomed to making this trip. She called out at the gatehouse, and a maid appeared from inside. Her doll-like, impassive expression never failed to leave a mark on my thoughts.

The maid had dark purple hair, which truly fit the gloomy atmosphere of the mansion. She was Tilty's private attendant—and a familiar face.

"How long has it been, Princess Anisphia, Lady Ilia? And Lady Magenta, too? Welcome to Marquis Claret's villa."

"Has it really been that long? How's Tilty?"

"Oh, she's fine. I'll take you to her. Please, step inside," the maid said. Despite the invitation, she still wore no discernable expression.

The interior of the mansion was remarkably simple, almost ascetic in its emptiness. Euphie kept glancing back and forth, intrigued by its lack of ostentation.

"Here we are…," said the maid, knocking on the door to a room. "I've brought you some visitors, milady."

"Let them in," came a woman's voice, indolent and disinterested.

When the maid opened the door, the scent of chemicals wafted out from inside.

Euphie raised a hand to her face, frowning as the unexpected odor stung her nose. I flashed her an apologetic smile before stepping inside.

The room was lined with bookshelves, all crammed with ingredients for various medicines and elixirs. On the desk was a mess of materials and the equipment used for processing them.

Finally, sitting behind that desk was a young woman watching us languorously.

If I had to choose one word to describe her, it would be *gloomy*. Her long violet hair reached all the way to her waist, and her dark red eyes were fixated on us. Her skin was morbidly white, accentuating the deep violet of her dress. She was my not-quite friend, my inescapable companion, Lady Tilty Claret.

"It's been a while since you dropped by, hasn't it?" she said. "Last time was when you stocked up on that ether drug and gave me a checkup, no?"

"Yeah. You're as reclusive as ever, I see. Why don't you try getting a little sunlight every now and then?"

“Oh dear. Are you telling me to go and *kill* myself?” Tilty’s lips curled in a sly smile.

The expression wasn’t particularly cute, though—if anything, she was being ironic. I did have to admit she had a pretty face, but it was so very gloomy. The combination made for an uncanny effect.

“Humans don’t die when exposed to sunlight. Don’t you know it’s actually more dangerous to avoid it altogether?”

“My health will be ruined by exposure to the sun. Won’t you leave me alone, please?”

“You’re like a toadstool, all miserable and dreary!”

“That’s something, coming from the rampaging Princess Peculiar, wouldn’t you say?”

Euphie stepped between us, interrupting our verbal barbs. She was scowling.

Tilty looked back and forth between us in curiosity, licking her lips. “Oh? Is that Duke Magenta’s treasured daughter? I heard she’s a *true* child prodigy, quite unlike me.”

“Yep. This is Euphie, my adorable assistant.”

“…Euphyllia Magenta. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lady Claret.”

“Tilty is fine. I hate it when people stand on ceremony. Besides, you owe me little formality at your status.”

“Ah…” Euphie exhaled, thrown off by Tilty’s attitude. She didn’t really have much experience dealing with people like her. I figured she had no clue as to how to respond.

“If so, then you could stand to act more appropriately,” I suggested.

“Are you one to talk, Lady Anis?” Euphie asked.

“Indeed.” Ilia nodded.

“Whose side are you on?!” I cried out.

Ilia simply cleared her throat.

Tilty changed the subject. “And? Just what are you doing here? If all you need is more of that ether drug, you could have come alone, no? So what are you up to, bringing your maidservant and your assistant with you?”

“Right. I was about to get to that.” I glanced across at Ilia, who was holding a piece of luggage—a thoroughly overwrapped box—in her hands.

Ilia placed the box down on an empty part of the desk and unlocked it to reveal its contents.

“This is a piece of the dragon magicite I retrieved just recently,” I explained.

“…Oh? It is?” Tilty answered, her eyes narrowing in interest. The crystal had certainly seized her attention.

The dragon magicite had been divided into pieces for secure storage, but I was fine letting her handle this chunk. She turned it

over in her hands, observing it carefully.

"Are you asking me to prepare a new ether drug with this?"

"No… I want to try a new technique, so I thought I'd ask for your help."

"A new technique…?" Tilty asked.

All three of them stared across at me. Well, I hadn't explained my plans before coming here.

I glanced at Tilty, and she understood the gist of what I was getting at. She turned back to her maidservant, motioning with her chin for the woman to withdraw.

After confirming the maid had left the room, Tilty murmured something under her breath. A luminescent phenomenon, the precursor to a magical ability, filled the air before soon fizzling out.

"No one should be able to eavesdrop on us in here now."

"Thanks… I fought a dragon the other day for this piece of magicite."

"Yes, I heard it was a real rough-and-tumble. And?"

"I defeated it; all well and good. The problem came after that. Not that it's something to be afraid of." I breathed a sigh, squeezing my eyes shut. Then, raising my hands softly to my chest, I continued, "The dragon entrusted me with *knowledge*."

"…What? You're saying the creature had the intelligence to hold a conversation?"

"Yes. It sent its thoughts directly into my brain. That was intriguing in and of itself, but what I want to ask you about is the knowledge it gave me."

Still sitting in her chair, Tilty crossed her arms and legs. Her silence was a prompt to continue.

"With this knowledge, we might be able to find more uses for magicite, other than just drugs and potions."

"…I see. So you want my help?"

"After me, you're the second-most familiar person with magicite in all the kingdom."

"All I have is what I learned by spending time around you."

"…And there's another reason. The dragon…it cursed me. I'm trying to work out what it did, so I wanted to ask you to examine me—"

"What?!" Tilty exclaimed loudly, sending her chair flying as she raced toward me.

Euphie reflexively leaped between the two of us to stop her

before she physically grabbed me.

Tilty stared across at Euphie for a moment before rounding on me. “Why didn’t you say something sooner, Anis?! A curse?! A *curse*?! And from a dragon intelligent enough to communicate?!”

“…I thought you would be upset, but I didn’t expect you to be *this* angry.”

“…What’s the meaning of this?” Euphie asked again, her gaze shifting warily between me and Tilty.

“Tilty is a collector and a student of curses.”

“…Huh?” Euphie gawked. She clearly had no idea at all what I was talking about.

* * *

“I’m sorry I got so upset,” Tilty said.

“How can you say that without even the slightest bit of contrition?”

Now that Tilty’s excitement had cooled, we took seats in a small circle.

“Um, Miss Tilty…?”

“You can just call me by name, Lady Euphyllia.”

“…What exactly *is* a curse collector?” Euphie asked again, flustered by Tilty’s unconventional manner of speech.

Tilty placed a finger on her chin as she searched for an answer. “How much do you know about my situation, Lady Euphyllia? It seems you know I’m the shame of my father, Duke Claret.”

“I’ve heard the rumors.”

“I see. Well, it isn’t a particularly long story, but perhaps I should explain. According to Anis here, when I use magic, the magical energy inside my soul—or rather, the element that becomes magical energy—gets thrown out of balance. In the past, that has led to me getting aggressive and committing some rather violent acts.”

“…I’ve heard about that as well.”

“You have? Well, that’s why magic itself is essentially a curse for me.”

Tilty’s confession surprised Euphie. Her reaction was understandable. The magic bestowed on the Kingdom of Palettia by its guardian spirits was said to be a blessing, certainly not a curse. If

I made such a statement in public, I would invite criticism from everyone around me.

Still, for Tilty, magic really was a curse. The more she used it, the more aggressive it made her. That was an inescapable fact.

"After going through that experience, I lost all interest in magic. Instead, I've chosen the path of an alchemist. I've also taken up medicine."

"Is that because…you suffered yourself?"

I found myself letting out a snort. "Tilty isn't quite that admirable," I interjected.

I was well aware that her motives for studying alchemy and medicine weren't so innocent.

"First things first—cases that can't be cured by medicine or magic are known as *curses*," I explained. "Tilty is just an eccentric who likes to unravel cases that can't be solved by conventional methods."

"That's not quite true," Tilty interrupted. "It isn't exactly that I *like* such cases. I'm simply not interested in cases that have a cure. And I don't appreciate being called an eccentric by someone like *you*, Anis, devoting your whole life to magic when you can't even use it yourself."

"Yes, indeed. They *are* birds of a feather, wouldn't you say?" Ilia remarked to Euphie.

""We are *not*!"" Tilty and I snapped indignantly.

Realizing what we had just done, we both turned away from each other with a huff.

Tilty had a negative and skeptical attitude toward magic. She had no interest at all in finding ways to use it safely, as I did. The only thing that we had in common was a shared interest in pursuing and elucidating its many mysteries. That was it.

All that was to say we understood one another, but we didn't sympathize. Our hearts weren't close enough for us to really consider each other close friends. Our belief systems were simply too different. So we were friends only by the loosest definition—and we always would be.

Tilty turned to Euphie. "Well, I'm sure *you* can understand where I'm coming from, being Anis's assistant, no? Or maybe you've just resigned yourself to her way of thinking?"

"What's that supposed to mean?!" I yelled.

She certainly didn't need to say the second half of all that! And

Euphie didn't need to let out a sigh of agreement, either!

"Let's get back to the topic at hand. What do you mean, the dragon *cursed* you, Anis?" Tilty asked.

"It's only a guess, but I do *feel* cursed. I can't explain exactly what's different from before, but I can try to surmise from the knowledge it gave me…"

"Explain as much as you can, then," Tilty urged, leaning forward slightly.

Euphie and Ilia were staring my way, too, but that, I knew, was out of concern for my well-being.

"I can only explain it as a feeling, but I think I'm probably slowly becoming more like a dragon."

"Becoming like a dragon…? What does that…mean…?" Euphie demanded, reaching out to me worriedly.

I took her hand in my own, letting out an easygoing laugh. "Don't worry. So long as I can make proper use of it, this could be a good thing."

"A *good* thing?"

"In principle, I can't use magic without the help of an ether drug. But if I could use the dragon's magicite in a different way, I might be able to avoid having to take these tonics in the future."

"Other than turning it into a drug, you mean? Did you learn that from the knowledge the dragon gave you?"

"I think that's what the dragon wanted when it entrusted the magicite to me."

"And you've already come up with a concrete idea?"

"Yes. This is my plan."

With that, I pulled a set of documents out of a separate bag from the one that I had brought the magicite crystal in.

Tilty's expression as she read over my notes slowly underwent a profound change. At first, her expression was one of surprise bordering on dismay. But gradually, it shifted to a fearless grin—even excitement.

Finally, she placed the notes down on her desk and glanced back at me. "You're as out there as ever. But I think I get it. If you're saying the dragon gave you this idea, then it's *definitely* a curse." She paused there to breathe a deep sigh and flashed me a challenging grin.

Euphie raised a hand in the air, uneasy with how things were developing. "Um, sorry. May I take a look?"

Tilty handed her my notes.

As Euphie skimmed over the documents, she furrowed her brow. Then, I found her staring not at the notes, but at me. The only emotion that I could read in her eyes was alarm.

"…Are you really going to put yourself through this?" she asked.

"Yes. I need it."

Euphie was clearly reluctant to accept this answer. It looked for a moment like she wanted to say something, but instead, she let out a deep sigh and frowned.

No doubt concerned by Euphie's reaction, Ilia took the documents from her and began flipping through them herself. After checking them over, she closed her eyes and held a hand up to her forehead, exhaling deeply. "…You really are a handful, Your Highness. But I suspect you won't listen to reason no matter how we might try to stop you, no?"

Euphie and Ilia exchanged glances, both sighing as they let their shoulders drop.

I felt sorry for these two, really, but I wouldn't let them hold me back.

"Of course, I'm not going to do it right away—only after verifying that it will work properly, and if there's anything wrong with the process, I'll forget about it. So I want your help, all three of you."

"I have no objections. It sounds fun," Tilty said with a nod and an enthusiastic grin.

"If this is what you want, I have no right to stop you," Ilia murmured in a resigned tone.

"…Lady Anis."

"Yes, Euphie?"

"…I understand. There's no stopping you when you find something you absolutely need to do, so at least make sure it's safe. That's my only condition," she said, her expression grave.

I met her gaze head-on, nodding in agreement. Then I turned my attention back to the dragon magicite. The crystal was as silent as ever, but it seemed to let out a faint glimmer as it drew in all the surrounding light.

“I’ll be back tomorrow, Lady Anis.”

“Yep. Have a good time, Euphie. Say hello to your mother for me.”

Euphie was temporarily returning to her home at the Magenta estate to see her family for the holiday. Having taken care of her baggage, the carriage attendant was waiting out front while Euphie stood empty-handed.

I had come to the entrance to see her off, but Euphie simply stared back, unmoving.

Finally, tilting her head to one side, she took a step toward me. “All right, Lady Anis? You can’t go to see Tilty without permission. I will be very cross with you if you go without me, understood?”

“I know, I know. You don’t need to worry. I’m following the proper procedures…”

“…Please don’t keep any secrets from me, all right?” Her fingers gingerly held on to the hem of my clothes, the light in her eyes difficult to describe.

If I *did* hide something from her, how would she look at me then? Just trying to imagine it made me anxious.

Once I saw Euphie into the carriage that would take her back to the Magenta estate, I let out a deep sigh as it set off. Right up to the moment that she disappeared from sight, Euphie’s gaze was fixated on me reprovingly.

“…She’s such a worrywart. I even said there was no problem.”

Ilia, who had been waiting behind me, stepped forward. “All the same, it’s only natural to be concerned,” she said.

I placed my arms behind my head at this comment, pursing my lips. “Do you think *I* want to do this experiment completely blind?”

“You need to convey that sentiment to others if you want their understanding, Your Highness.”

“Right, right. I understand, I understand,” I answered, sticking my tongue out. Ilia thwacked me over the head with the side of her hand, and my teeth chomped down on my tongue. It hurt so much that tears formed in my eyes; I thought I might pass out.

“More importantly, Your Highness, we received a message from

the royal palace earlier."

"A message?"

"Yes. You're to return to the palace once Lady Euphyllia has left for her parents' estate. His Majesty wants to see you."

"Ugh…" I grimaced. So my father had waited specifically until Euphyllia had safely left. I had a bad feeling about this.

"…I—I haven't done anything wrong, you know?" I began to explain when Ilia's eyes turned stern.

She breathed a sigh before answering, "Perhaps he's heard of your latest experiment with Lady Tilty? He may want to question you if he caught wind that the kingdom's two greatest troublemakers are conspiring together."

"Ugh…"

I couldn't deny that Tilty and I both had criminal records, so to speak. We had created that ether drug together, for example. I had told my father about it after first producing it, thinking that I needed to report the product of my research.

He had been extremely angry at the time. That said, he *had* allowed me to use it, probably because he understood that I couldn't use magic any other way.

If I were conducting an experiment by myself, he probably wouldn't be so on edge, but if he heard that I was working with Tilty on something… The project still being underway only made me feel even more uneasy.

"…Do you think he'll be angry?"

"Do you think he *won't* be?"

My shoulders drooped as Ilia responded with a question of her own. Even Euphie had expressed her reluctance, so I could certainly imagine my father's response. Still, I couldn't *not* go through with it.

"…I want to run away and hide."

"If you do that, you'll only make matters worse."

…Ilia was right, of course. Once more, I hung my head and breathed a deep sigh of resignation.

* * *

"…I'm here," I said, sighing again.

After I arrived at the royal palace, a maidservant led me through the corridors to my father's office. The stares directed my

way by countless onlookers weren't at all pleasant.

My social position was dramatically changing. There was the turmoil of Allie's broken engagement and my defeat of the dragon.

Allie was still being punished for nullifying his betrothal to Euphie; he was essentially under house arrest. I, on the other hand, had been credited with slaying a dragon. But even if that was being lauded as a remarkable feat, it didn't change the fact that I was still marginalized by the nobility, treated rather like a swollen boil.

As I approached my father's office, I was met with a wide assortment of reactions. Some onlookers tried to avoid me completely, while others watched from a distance, whispering among themselves.

It was mainly the nobles working in the palace who had an uncharitable view of me. The knights and maids, on the other hand, treated me rather favorably. It was a confounding combination of such contrasting extremes.

Ah, I just want to go home… The second I'm finished with Father, I'll be out of here…

Once we arrived, the maid knocked on the door and asked to be allowed inside. As soon as permission was granted, I stepped through the door.

"Father. It's me, Anisphia, as you…requested…"

My voice trailed off as I laid eyes on the room in front of me, as well as my father and Duke Grantz. They were waiting inside with one other person.

The moment we made eye contact, I spun around, trying to flee, only for the maid to slam the door closed. There was no way out.

"Thank you for coming, Anis."

That voice sent a chill down my spine, and my knees felt like they were about to give way. I couldn't possibly forget it. After all, it belonged to the person I feared most in the whole world…!

Her frame was even smaller than mine, and I was already rather petite. She looked to be of a similar age as me, with a cute face and an adorable physique.

I was well aware, however, that she was cute only in her appearance. Her personality and bearing were as sharp as a knife's edge, and if that wasn't enough, her deep blue eyes were just as piercing.

Her waist-length red hair was tied up in a braid, swaying slightly with each subtle movement of her face. Yes, she was the

person I feared most, whom I was most powerless to stop. The current queen of the Kingdom of Palettia, Sylphine Maise Palettia—my mother.

"M-Mother…?! What are you doing here?!" My voice was hoarse with trepidation—I was not expecting to meet her here in my father's office.

She breathed a heavy sigh, fixing me with a glare. My body froze before her.

"Why? Why am *I* here, Anis? How about because I heard that Algard broke off his engagement, and then that *you* slew a dragon? You can't expect me to worry about diplomacy after hearing reports like that. I arrived just yesterday." Her voice was caustic.

To a careless observer, she may have seemed younger than I was, but her intimidating presence completely overwhelmed that impression. And in spite of her outward appearance, she had been a fierce warrior and leader on the battlefield during her youth. People said she was the strongest warrior in all the kingdom and that her power was unmatched even today. She was usually out touring other countries as a diplomat, but, well…now she had come home…

"…Well, Anis. Anyway, take a seat."

"R-right…"

My father urged me to sit down on one of the sofas used for receiving guests. He and my mother sat beside me, while Duke Grantz occupied the sofa across from us.

"…So, Anis?"

I—I want to flee…! To leave everything behind and run…! The sense of pressure that my mother was exuding was formidable. It was like a spear was stuck in my throat.

"I hear you've been keeping well while I was gone. But I see that you haven't mended your tomboy ways. As your mother, I'm starting to worry that I should see to your education myself."

"Yes! I'm so sorry for my actions, Mother! I'm trying to change! I'll live a life of purity and virtue!"

I absolutely hated my mother's style of discipline! She was a strict martial artist. I trembled just thinking back on the way that she had punished me as a child. She knew only the language of raw strength—and when she meted out punishments, it was through real-life combat!

I may have been a skilled adventurer and confident in my own abilities, but the last thing that I wanted was to go head-to-head with her. It would be a training match dressed up as a lesson in propriety…!

"…Well, that's fine. Your contribution in defeating the dragon is worthy of commendation. But do be sure not to make a lie of what you just said." My mother narrowed her eyes, staring fixedly across at me—but she did seem to be laying down her arms.

I breathed a sigh of relief. I knew from deep trauma not to anger her. "So…did you call me here to give me a scolding?"

"No, but you deserved one…," my father responded. "We wanted to see you once Euphyllia had gone home. *She* is who we want to discuss."

"Ah. So you were waiting until Euphie was out of the way? And that's why Duke Grantz is here, too?"

"Yes."

Since he was my father's adviser, it wasn't unusual for the duke to be found in the royal palace, even on holidays. But why did they all want to see me without Euphie present…?

I was a bit surprised when my mother cleared her throat, straightened her back, and looked me squarely in the eye. “Anis, I have a great many things to say about your behavior, but for the time being, I’ll simply praise you for a job well-done.”

“Huh?”

“For intervening in that scene at the academy when Algard broke off his engagement… I’ve summoned you here today because we need to talk about your brother.”

“Allie?”

“Yes,” my father said, taking over from my mother. “The dragon attack took place only shortly afterward, so we weren’t able to discuss his motives until things settled down. We’ve finally been able to put the pieces together.”

Apparently, the interviews with my brother and his friends had been postponed for a while because of the dragon attack.

“Is that why you wanted to talk to me without Euphie?”

“…Normally, we would want to hear from her, too, but your father has told me about her current state,” my mother answered. “It would be better to give her some time right now, wouldn’t you say, Anis?”

My father added, “…Yes. We should set it aside for the time being. She’s finally starting to get used to life in the detached palace, and I don’t want to put her through any unnecessary stress.”

I agreed with my father that we should keep all this from Euphie for a while. She was finally managing to relax now that she was living with me.

Perhaps because of that, she seemed to be letting her true emotions show more and more lately. In any event, I thought it would be premature to ask her about Allie and his cohort just yet.

“So why did you summon *me*?”

“Because you need to hear what we’ve learned, though I’m sure you won’t like it… Our investigations have brought to light some frightening facts,” my father said bitterly, looking rather like he had just swallowed a bug.

Just how bad could it all be for him to say that? This preamble alone was enough to fill me with a sense of foreboding. I could already sense trouble on the horizon…

My father seemed rather melancholy about it, but he understood better than anyone that we wouldn’t be able to get anywhere without a proper discussion.

His voice was heavy. “I’ve heard from Algard and the other noble sons who were involved in the fracas… It’s enough to give you a migraine. To begin with, it wasn’t Euphyllia who was harassing Miss Cyan, but the young ladies surrounding her. They all testified that they were trying to undermine Miss Cyan on Euphyllia’s behalf.”

My face clouded over. I could see why it was causing him a headache…

“So you’re saying Euphie didn’t do anything wrong herself?”

“It seems that she aired her complaints to Miss Cyan directly, but what she said was well within the bounds of common sense, as far as we can tell. Rather, it seems like Miss Cyan was unfamiliar with expectations at the academy and *needed* to be set straight.”

So Euphie had remonstrated with Miss Cyan, but she hadn’t done anything to directly harm her. The hardships that she had suffered were actually the result of other girls—all of whom said that they had been following Euphyllia’s instructions.

“Do you have any actual proof?”

“Not as such. The girls involved all say that they were doing her bidding, but there’s no hard evidence. It isn’t yet clear who did what, either, and there’s some suggestion that Miss Cyan may have simply overreacted. There are so many instances of purported harassment that it’s hard to keep track of them all.”

“How absurd. Do they expect me to believe that Euphyllia, *my daughter*, would engage in a vulgar ploy simply to defame someone?” Duke Grantz’s voice was nearly dripping with enmity.

I recoiled at the sight of his expression, utterly devoid of warmth. It certainly was a nasty accusation.

No one would say who had actually committed these misdeeds, yet they all insisted that it was on Euphie’s behalf.

On her behalf. It sounded like she hadn’t even directly told anyone to do anything, but they had simply done it because they *thought* that it was what she wanted, or else felt somehow pressured to do so. It was such a cowardly excuse.

“At this point, I don’t know whether to even believe the testimonies anymore. Those who weren’t particularly close to either Euphyllia or Miss Cyan expressed relatively coolheaded opinions… but that might just be because they didn’t know what was really going on.”

“Or it could be because Miss Cyan surrounded herself with the

most influential people in the academy," I pointed out.

"The crown prince, the son of the commander of the Royal Guard, the son of the director of the Ministry of the Arcane, the sons of powerful merchant enterprises that the aristocracy can't afford to ignore… Dealing with all that will be a handful," my mother said, but her eyes glimmered in defiance as though facing down fresh enemies. If those young men had been sitting before her, she may very well have struck out at them then and there.

"However, when it comes to the parties involved, the testimonies seem to be split between those who think that Euphyllia was at fault and those who blame Miss Cyan for having incurred Euphyllia's displeasure."

"They are?"

"Hmm… The only way we're going to resolve this will be by talking to the main parties themselves. I'm planning to have Baron Cyan bring his daughter to the palace in the near future. That should help us shine some light on her character. Do you want to be present, Anis?"

Lainie Cyan—I would be lying if I said that I wasn't curious about her. Deep in my memories of my past life, I could remember a scene very similar to how Euphie's engagement had ended—of a lady ready to denounce a villainous young woman surrounded by men leaping to her defense.

However, that had been a fictional story. Up until I saw it happen with my own eyes, I would never have expected the same thing to play out in reality. What kind of person *was* Miss Cyan to become the center of that unlikely commotion?

"I'd be interested in sitting in, if you don't mind."

"Hmm… It *is* a little strange, for what it's worth."

"Huh? Strange?" my father murmured, wearing a curious expression. That made me uneasy. Something was amiss, but there was no telling exactly what.

"Somehow, it seems that everyone who has interviewed Miss Cyan has become sympathetic to her position."

"Sympathetic?"

"Ah… Some have apparently become quite adamant that Euphyllia was the one at fault."

"…I don't know what kind of person Miss Cyan is, but I know Euphie would never intentionally hurt someone."

"Yes, I know. I trust her, too. Nonetheless, it *is* somewhat

worrying that everyone who has spoken to Miss Cyan seems to have become her ally."

That certainly was a disquieting trend. I only knew Euphie, so I couldn't say what had happened at the Royal Aristocratic Academy of Palettia, but I sincerely doubted that she had any intention of ever hurting or tricking Miss Cyan.

Still, it sounded like Miss Cyan had the support of a considerable number of individuals. Not only had those noble sons supported her during the incident itself, but other people who had been interviewed were arguing that she wasn't at fault, either.

…What exactly had happened? Just what *was* the truth? The academy was closed to the outside, so it was remarkably difficult to grasp the details.

Whatever it was, it seemed that *something* was taking place there. It would have been nice if life there could have just gone smoothly—but if that were the case, we wouldn't be where we were now.

"Anis, you may be foolheaded at times, but there *are* certain things that only you notice. I'm going to need your help sorting the truth from the lies. And we'll probably need you to take part in more royal duties from here on out. Keep that in mind."

"Ugh…"

"…Ugh?"

"A-ahem! Ahem! Sorry! It's nothing, Mother!"

I had accidentally let out a disappointed sigh but quickly tried to mask it by clearing my throat when my mother fixed me with a reproving look. I averted my gaze, avoiding her cold, sharp eyes.

My father, watching us interact in this way, placed his fingers between his brow, letting out a weary sigh. "…That's all I have to say."

"S-so you only wanted to talk about Miss Cyan?"

"Yes… Why? Are you up to something else now?"

"No, no! Not at all!"

It looked like they weren't going to make a big deal of the fact that I was frequently visiting Tilty! Thank goodness for that! Come to think of it, maybe my parents were too busy dealing with my brother's fiasco to pay much attention to me.

…All right. I should get out of here before they start asking questions. It looks like the conversation is over, in any event!

"In that case, I'll be going…"

“Hold on, Anis.” Just as I was about to rise to my feet, my mother gave me another glare.

I froze on the spot, falling back to my seat. *U-ugh! I—I want to run away!*

“You aren’t causing Euphyllia any trouble, are you, Anis?”

“N-no. Wh-why would you think that…?”

“Oh…? You seem to be acting rather suspicious, seeing as you keep refusing to meet my gaze?”

“N-not at all! I’m doing my best each and every day to make sure she stays healthy and happy!”

“…Very good, then,” my father said. “Are you listening, Anis? Responsibility for this whole affair lies squarely on the royal family. We’ve caused the Magentas considerable trouble, and we owe them a debt. If we’re to reward them for their loyalty, you’re going to need to behave and conduct yourself like a proper royal. You may be a high-ranking adventurer, but just what were you thinking, rushing out to fight a dragon? And getting Euphyllia caught up in it, too…?”

“A-argh! I thought you said you didn’t call me here to tell me off! You liar!”

“Quiet!” my mother warned, staring at me with her ogre-like eyes.

I straightened my posture in terror. I was left with the unmistakable impression that, behind my father’s surprised countenance, he sympathized with my predicament. Duke Grantz acted as though none of this were any concern of his.

Nghhhhh! If you’re willing to feel sorry for me, do something! Help me! But all I could do was suffer in silence as my mother proceeded to give me a stern lecture…

* * *

“…Well, that was unpleasant,” I murmured as I staggered through the corridors of the royal palace.

My mother all but put me on the rack during that meeting, and now my mental strength was completely depleted. I could barely keep myself upright as I made my way home.

“…Anyway…” I came to a sudden stop, falling deep into thought.

What exactly had happened to Euphie? Or rather, what exactly had happened at the Aristocratic Academy? That was by far my biggest worry right now.

I wasn't a student there. In fact, I had no idea what it was like there.

How had Euphie spent her time? How had her peers regarded her? *I* knew she was a good person at heart, but that was only after her engagement had been so dramatically called off. Up until that moment, she was supposed to have been the perfect young lady.

I couldn't deny the possibility that the male students might have taken to protecting Miss Cyan because of Euphie. I could hardly broach the subject to her directly, though…

Besides, she tends to be rather oblivious when it comes to her own mental state…

The incident had caused her significant pain. I didn't want to reopen those wounds. So basically, the best course of action might be to talk to someone else about it, but I had no clue to whom I could turn.

The only other noble my age I knew was Tilty, but she hadn't attended the academy, either…

A voice called out to me, breaking me out of my thoughts. "Ah, Princess Anisphia? It's rare to see you stopping by."

It was Commander Sprout, the leader of the Royal Guard. I was taken aback for a moment.

"Commander Sprout. How are you?"

"Very good. What seems to be the matter? You don't normally visit the royal palace."

"My parents summoned me for a dressing-down," I answered with an irritated shrug.

The commander forced a smile. "Queen Sylphine is worried about you. And you *were* rather reckless. It's her job as a parent to scold you."

"I suppose so…" I wasn't fond of that being considered a parent's responsibility.

An idea popped into my head as I peered up at the commander's face. His eyes twitched wide open in alarm, but I kept my eyes locked on him, refusing to look away.

He broke into a confused frown. "Um, Princess Anisphia? Is something the matter?"

"Commander Sprout! I have a favor to ask you!"

"…Why do I have a bad feeling about this? What is it?" He gave a strained smile.

I flashed him a full grin and placed a hand gently on his own. "I know this is sudden…but do you think I could pay a visit to your home today?"

* * *

The commander wasn't just the head of the Royal Guard; he was also a count, and his son—Navre Sprout—had been a member of the group that had stood by Allie's side to denounce Euphie back when he had broken off their engagement.

"…You really want to speak directly with my son?"

"I can't stand by and do nothing!"

I was sitting across from the commander, en route to his mansion in a horse-drawn carriage. I had one purpose here—to ask Navre about what had happened at the academy.

I had known Commander Sprout for a long time—he was, after all, the one who had first taught me the basics of swordsmanship. He was particularly warm toward me, probably because of the help that I had offered to various chivalric orders throughout the kingdom during my work as an adventurer.

I didn't like taking advantage of his goodwill like this, but my only hope was to speak directly with someone who had been immediately involved in the affair, who had personally and publicly denounced Euphie. I needed to know why he had done it.

"How is Navre?"

"…He seems to have settled down, but he won't listen to a word I say." The commander usually had such a gentle bearing, but at that moment, his lip was curled in disgust.

So that was it—Navre was going through a rebellious period. Were sons of noblemen allowed such a phase?

No doubt he had done what he had because he thought it was the right thing to do, which would make addressing his actions rather difficult.

"…Have you heard about what happened with Miss Cyan?"

"Indeed. Did His Majesty tell you the details, Princess Anisphia?"

"Yes. My father says a great many people are sympathetic to

her position…”

“My son, apparently, is one of them. I wish I knew how he could be so narrow-minded. As the son of a knight commander, he ought to know a little shame and behave himself accordingly…”

Given Commander Sprout’s attitude, it was clear that Navre had become a cause for shame and disappointment. The commander had probably had high hopes for him and certainly wouldn’t have expected him to be part of the ruckus that had broken off Euphie’s engagement.

“I agree that Miss Cyan’s position does warrant some degree of consideration, and yet…,” the commander murmured.

“Well, she was born a commoner. Her father was only recently elevated to barony status, right?”

“That’s correct… She wasn’t brought up as a noblewoman by nature.”

“Oh? Is that so?”

“Yes. However, it’s likely that her mother was of aristocratic blood. Miss Cyan is said to be the forgotten daughter of a woman the baron had feelings for during his adventurer days.”

“This is the first I’ve heard of that.”

“Baron Cyan chanced on her in an orphanage and took her into his home. Upon examination, it was found that she had a talent for magic, and so she was admitted into the Aristocratic Academy.”

“Huh…? That’s certainly a complicated story…”

In other words, it was possible that Miss Cyan’s mother came from nobility. Many hereditary nobles would probably not take the news well.

“Her mother has long since passed away, so there’s no way to know for sure,” the commander continued. “But the fact that Miss Cyan is a former commoner with a talent for magic may be what has won her such sympathy.”

“I see. I thought it was always the kingdom’s policy to bring talent into its ranks? Like how successful adventurers can be elevated to the nobility?”

That policy had been enacted by my father’s father—in other words, during my grandfather’s time. My grandfather had passed away before I was born, so I had only ever heard about it secondhand.

The Kingdom of Palettia had a long history, and the blood of its noble houses was increasingly becoming mixed with that of

commoners. Some nobles eloped with lowborn lovers, and others, unable to maintain their status, had fallen from grace. That was ostensibly why some commoners had a natural aptitude for magic. Miss Cyan could well have been one of them.

"I'd like to hear your thoughts, Commander Sprout. What do you think about this whole incident?"

"What do you mean exactly?"

"It seems to me like these noble sons allowed themselves to be led astray by our baron's daughter. The investigation does seem to suggest she was innocent, but I can't really say I'm entirely satisfied with that explanation…"

"We also looked into the orphanage where Miss Cyan used to live, and her mother's family home," the commander said vaguely. "But we didn't find anything of interest."

"Hmm… Don't you think it smells like a conspiracy?"

"I can't say for sure…but at the very least, I suspect there must be some connection to Miss Cyan."

"I see. This is getting stranger by the minute…"

Had my brother really caused such a fuss breaking off his engagement with Euphie simply because he had fallen in love with another woman? I had my doubts. If that was true…poor Euphie.

I fell to pondering, and then the carriage came to a stop. We had arrived at the Sprout mansion.

The commander led me inside. "This is Navre's room," he said, showing me to his door.

"Thank you so much, Commander Sprout," I answered with a polite smile.

Now then, I guess I should start with the proper greeting? I knocked on the door.

"Who's there?" came a sharp voice from inside.

I snorted just a bit. What a snappish, moody greeting. *I see, I see. He certainly does seem to be going through a rebellious phase.* With that, I struck on an idea.

I took a deep breath before calling out in a loud, forceful voice, "You're under attack! Like it or not, you're getting a visit!"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!"

I broke down the door with as hard a kick as I could. The commander gawked in shock, but I paid him no heed. Momentum was an essential element of surprise!

Navre, standing inside the room, was braced for combat, as if a

bandit had suddenly attacked. All right, this strategy was working as planned! Now all I had to do was push on!

"Don't move!" called out the commander. "It's Princess Anisphia Wynn Palettia!"

"Huh?" Navre stammered.

"Long time no see, Navre Sprout!"

"…Huh? Er, um… Huh?" Unsure of how to react, Navre shifted his gaze around the room.

I could sense the commander ready to tear his hair out behind me, but that didn't matter!

I closed the distance to Navre, took his hands in my own, and shook them up and down.

Navre, until that moment standing in utter shock, finally came back to reality. "Y-Your Highness?!" he sputtered. "Wh-what's going on?!"

"Hmm, that's a better reaction. I can see the relation, Commander Sprout!"

"What are you doing?!"

"I was trying to greet your son in a nonroyal way!"

"I don't really understand…!" The commander remained utterly confounded.

Navre, likewise, stared back at me in disbelief.

Heh-heh-heh, I'm holding all the cards here!

"Now, could you leave me with him?" I said to the commander. "Thanks for showing me in!"

"Eh? Hold on—"

I slammed the door shut again just as hard as I had opened it. Now Navre and I were alone. After all, it wouldn't be easy to talk with his father present.

"So it's been a while, Navre!" I began.

"Eh, ah, yes… It has, hasn't it…?" he responded, probably still not recovered from his shock.

Navre had dark green hair and pale, honey-colored eyes, very similar in hue to his father's. He was tall and slender, but not overly so. If anything, he was like a textbook illustration of a handsome knight. No doubt most ordinary girls wouldn't be able to keep the gorgeous young man out of their minds.

As I looked him over, I cut right to the chase. "I've come to see you today because there's something I want to ask you. I heard you've been confined to your room, so I had to force my way in…

Ahem, *pay an unscheduled visit*. Yes, that's better."

"…What do you want to ask me?" Navre grew tense now that the shock of this unexpected encounter was wearing off.

And little wonder. We had never spoken long enough to consider one another more than casual acquaintances. Normally, the only times when we might see each other were when I visited the royal guard for one reason or another.

"Let's not mince words. I want you to tell me why you denounced Euphyllia Magenta."

Something bitter flashed across his expression, and he bristled. It was a natural reaction, considering that that was why he was essentially under house arrest.

"Don't misunderstand. I'm not here to take you to task."

"…What?"

"You know I've taken Euphie in as my assistant, right? I won't deny I'm her ally, but that doesn't mean I'm going to do anything to harm you."

"…Do you expect me to believe that?" Navre spit back. Ah, so he *didn't* trust me.

I laughed defiantly, but I was angry. "Why don't you turn that question around? What about me *can* you trust?!" I demanded.

"You would say that about yourself?!" Navre shouted back, unable to catch my meaning.

Seeing that we had both lost our composure, I decided to start again. "I know it's a lot, just asking you to open up all of a sudden, but I'll be frank—I don't really care about your current situation."

"You don't…?"

"I don't know the first thing about love and romance and everything that comes with it. I'm happy to let people do what they want so long as it doesn't harm the kingdom. But when it comes to Euphie, it's different. I'm responsible for her now. And if she's upset about something, I want to help solve it for her, which is why we're dealing with this current matter. I want to ask you for the details… But you're still not convinced, are you, Navre?"

"…Well…" He couldn't hide how he felt.

"If it's a problem with Euphie, I'll give you my word. No matter the results of this, she won't be making any major public appearances again for a while, and her engagement with Allie is over. I'm not exaggerating when I say she's been robbed of her future, and nothing is certain for her anymore. So I just want to

know why this has happened."

I paused there to catch my breath before focusing my attention back on Navre. It would be awful to have to make Euphie relive that situation all over again. I wanted to know for myself what had happened.

"It's impossible to tell what's going on at the academy from the outside," I said. "So I'm curious. I want to know what you and the others were thinking when you did what you did. The truth might cause a headache for everyone running the country, and I know what that's like. But now that I'm involved, isn't it natural that I would want to know?"

Navre didn't respond to my question. He simply stood there stiffly, his sharp eyes piercing. Why on earth was he being so stubborn?

"From where I'm standing, it looks like you boys teamed up to drag Euphie down. I'm starting to suspect Miss Cyan might even be conspiring to overthrow the state."

"…That isn't what Lainie wants!" Navre cried out at this suggestion.

Problematic though I was, I was still a royal princess, so I knew that what I had just said was rather incendiary.

"Forget I'm royalty for a moment, will you? You can say anything. I'm not going to make you commit to it in public. I just want to hear what you really think. I don't think Allie is stupid, and I've never taken *you* for a fool, either. We all make mistakes. But doesn't it make you wonder when someone commits such a huge blunder for seemingly no reason?"

Allie may have been undistinguished, but he wasn't stupid. What he needed wasn't individual talent, but the ability to lead those around him.

For that reason, my father had no doubt been expecting him to win over the hearts and minds of everyone at the academy and to develop his relationship with Euphie. Everyone was especially disappointed that things had ended up this way. Even I thought it was unfortunate.

"I've only heard Euphie's side of the story. And besides, if she did do something wrong, I need to be able to help her fix it," I said.

Despite that, Navre continued to glare across at me in suspicion. In response, I poured my soul into my own eyes, hoping to convey the strength of my feelings.

I kept on, my eyes boring into Navre. I did not flinch. “As far as I’m concerned, Euphie is a good, hardworking person. Even if her honor is so badly damaged that she can’t reenter aristocratic society in the future, she can stay on as my assistant for as long as she likes. But something tells me that leaving this matter unfinished won’t do anyone any good. So I want to resolve it.”

He was the first to break, letting his gaze wander in discomfort… Perhaps this meant he would be willing to talk now?

“…There’s no use standing. Why don’t we sit down?” Navre pulled up a chair in resignation.

I took the seat across from him.

“…Honestly, this all sounds like some outlandish ploy, though,” he muttered.

“Let’s see,” I said, trying to brush that remark off with a chuckle.

Navre let out an exhausted sigh. I felt a little bad being so pushy, but I needed to know the truth.

“Let’s get to the main point, then. It *was* your intention to denounce Euphie, right?”

“…Yes. I heard she was treating Lainie unfairly. Algard suggested I speak out after he heard what happened.”

“So it was Allie’s idea? Did he ever get along with Euphie?”

“…I don’t know what kind of relationship *you* have with her, Princess Anisphia, but from what I’ve seen, Lady Euphyllia has always been cold. She’s always so perfect, and she doesn’t let anyone get near her…”

“Hmm? So she was distant with others?”

“From what I could see, at least,” Navre said with a furtive glance.

How would Euphie react if she heard herself being described that way?

To be honest, it might not be a problem at all. She was supposed to have become queen one day. Not showing unnecessary or excessive emotion was probably the right attitude to have in her position.

“I’m curious about your impressions of her, but that will do for now. Anyway, so you denounced her at Allie’s suggestion, right? And then…?”

“And then what?” Navre asked with suspicion.

I shrugged my shoulders. “I’m just wondering what you hoped

to gain from it, is all."

"Gain? *Gain…?* We simply wanted to right a wrong!" Navre declared angrily.

"I don't care about any of that. Emotional, subjective words like *right* and *wrong* won't help us get to the bottom of this," I said sternly.

It was all well and good to want to correct injustices, but the sentiments he was naming belonged more to the realm of fairy tales. In the political world, such actions could invite unwanted trouble. Especially if one let themselves get carried away by their emotions.

"What I'm asking is whether you wanted to make Euphie apologize for supposedly mistreating Miss Lainie and, through that, improve Miss Lainie's own position. That's what I mean by *gain*."

"…I suppose you could put it that way."

"I see. If you all acted on that assumption, then Euphie would have to be the kind of person who doesn't listen to others, right? That certainly does sound cold."

Navre seemed puzzled. *Huh? What?* I just wanted to confirm the facts; that was all. To work out how it all started and what happened at every step along the way.

"Are you on Lady Euphyllia's side, Princess Anisphia…?"

"She's under my protection, so you could say that. But if she really is in the wrong, I think that needs to be corrected. In fact, I *do* think she has been trying to conceal her emotions too much."

To be honest, I could understand why people would dislike someone who showed no flaws or weaknesses. It was little wonder that Euphie's perfectionism had made her enemies. That was one of the ways in which she had invited the current situation. Still, it was hard to say that letting a few flaws show would have prevented this.

Trying to be perfect wasn't her mistake. If she *had* made a mistake, it was that she had been hung up on perfection alone.

"Don't get me wrong. The reason I'm standing up for her is because of the way Allie denounced her. He left her with no defense. If both parties had agreed to discuss the matter properly, I wouldn't have gotten involved. Ah, and I am sorry for crashing into the party venue…"

If not for that coincidence, I would never have been able to bring her under my wing. It would have been a shame if her talent

had ended up going to waste, although there was always a possibility that someone else might have scouted her.

"Why didn't you try speaking to her first? Are you saying she was so stubborn, she wouldn't talk it over?"

He did not like that question, though there was something off about his reaction. He seemed momentarily surprised, as though suddenly doused with water.

"…Because…she wouldn't listen. I think."

"She wouldn't listen…? So you just rounded on her out of the blue? Without any warning?"

He said nothing, but he was clearly shaken. I let out an astonished sigh. There was certainly something wrong if bringing the matter up privately had never even occurred to him.

"Navre, I want you to think. From where I'm sitting, it looks to me like you all decided to ensnare Euphie, to fire your opening volley without even declaring war first."

"That's overstating it, no?!"

"War is *exactly* what this is. Her pride as a noble is at stake here, as is yours. You decided to round on her without warning. Can't you see why that's wrong? And when I point it out to you, you just clam up?"

Navre's complexion was growing worse by the second. He was holding his hands to his mouth, arching his back. *No*, I thought I heard him murmur in a small voice. Yes, no matter how you looked at this, something was clearly the matter with him.

I waited for him to calm down. Finally, after hanging his head for a long moment, he gradually raised his face.

"…Tell me again… Why are you asking *me* about all this…?"

"I just want to know what happened, what went wrong. If mistakes were made, we need to consider how not to repeat them. If anyone needs to make amends, we need to know what kind. And if it's all a trivial misunderstanding, let's treat it as such… So can I ask you something else now?"

Navre nodded. He relaxed a little, though his face was still deathly pale.

"Are you in love with Miss Lainie?"

Navre squeezed his eyes shut. He was bringing something to mind. "…I thought she was pretty. She looked so fragile. I wanted to protect her. I felt I had to. Lainie's always smiling, even when she's hurting inside. She tries so hard to keep people from noticing.

So maybe I *was* attracted to her. I can't deny that…"

"…I see. She wasn't born a noble, was she? I suppose it makes sense to want to lend her a helping hand at the academy, then. Especially if she's a good person at heart."

I couldn't help but sympathize with Navre. Had I been there, I might have wanted to reach out to her, too. But all the same, I couldn't stand what he and his friends had done.

"So why did you choose to resolve it by force? That's what I don't understand. It seems to me like a huge blunder on your part. And you said it was Allie's suggestion, right?"

"Yes…"

"Did Miss Lainie appreciate what you did?"

"Huh?" Navre blurted out as though my question had punched him in the gut. Stunned, he suddenly looked at me.

I held that eye contact with ferocity. "I'm asking if she was happy you did it. Did she ever say she *wanted* you to do it? From what I've heard of her, I don't think she would have wanted it to be resolved like this."

Navre sat motionless, essentially frozen in place. Then, as though a charm was wearing off, he began to tremble. He wrapped his arms around himself.

"…I…I…I thought I was doing it for her… What have I done…?" he said to himself, covering his face with his hands.

I remained silent. I wasn't party to what had happened, so there was still much I didn't know. Perhaps from some perspective that I couldn't fathom, he had anticipated a genuinely positive outcome.

But I just couldn't see how they thought that everything would just neatly work itself out. It had been incredibly foolish of them to set out on a course of action that was bound to fail.

"…They say that love can strike like a fever. This doesn't justify what you did, but you weren't in a sound frame of mind. I sympathize. All I can say is I'm sorry."

I couldn't hold a grudge against Navre like this.

At that moment, he picked his head up out of his hands and stared across at me. His eyes, drained of all strength, flitted around. "…Are you saying we were wrong, from your point of view?"

"I think you should consider the consequences of your actions. Your lovesickness seems to have cooled by now. Knowing how and when to change your perspective is essential if you want to make your way in the world."

“…You don’t hold back, do you?” Navre hunched over, dropping his eyes to the floor again.

…Lingering now, I realized, would only make him feel even worse. It was time for me to leave.

“I have one last question. Miss Lainie isn’t the kind of person who would want to drag others down, is she?”

“…No. I don’t think so.”

“I see. So it was all just an unfortunate misunderstanding. Or perhaps everyone was to blame. You’re not the only one at fault, Navre.”

I rose and turned to leave. I had heard everything that I had come for. Whatever Navre’s fate after this, there was nothing that I could do to change it. The only thing that I could offer him now was a few words of encouragement.

Perhaps sensing that I was readying to go, Navre, still with his face downturned, called out to me in a weak voice, “Please tell me… How do you see Euphyllia, Princess Anisphia?”

“She was destined to be queen. She suffocated her own sense of individuality to become someone capable of supporting her king, to become a guiding symbol for the whole country. She’s a kindhearted girl who allowed herself to be seen as cold. She wasn’t given the choice to be anything else.”

“…I see. Thank you,” Navre said behind me.

Before leaving, and without so much as glancing over my shoulder, I added, “Maybe I’m meddling by saying this, but no matter how grave a mistake you might make, your parents will always be ready to reach out to you. I suggest you talk to them.”

I didn’t hear Navre’s response. As I opened the door and stepped out from the room, I saw Commander Sprout waiting on the other side.

The commander stared across at me with an indescribable expression. He bowed his head in silence.

When I reached his side, I said, “…Commander Sprout, I should let you know something, just in case.”

“…What do you mean?”

“Something about all this strikes me as off… I can’t quite put my finger on it, though.”

With that, I fell silent. The commander didn’t pursue the matter any further, either.

And so I left him and made my way toward the entrance—an

indescribable, off-putting premonition taking root in my chest.

* * *

After meeting with Navre, I couldn't shake the unpleasant premonition that had fallen over me.

I made my way to my workshop and sank deep into thought. Yet no matter how I tried to make sense of everything, no answer revealed itself. I simply didn't have enough information to dispel this sense of foreboding. It was an intuitive feeling, but it wasn't at all clear where exactly my intuition itself came from.

…Lainie Cyan, huh?

Something momentous was looming over the horizon. I couldn't tell precisely what, though, with what little information I had. I was in a quandary, and I couldn't think of any way to free myself from it.

When finally I breathed a resigned sigh and picked my head up, I found Euphie staring across from me.

"Wha—?! E-Euphie?!"

"…So you finally noticed. I'm back."

"W-welcome home."

Had she masked her presence, or had I completely let down my guard? In any event, her gaze was searing, her eyes accusatory.

"You went to visit Count Sprout's residence, yes?"

"…Did Ilia say something…?"

Why couldn't she keep her mouth shut? My mind raced, trying to think of some sort of excuse, but nothing came to mind.

Euphie sighed, her patience exhausted. "…I thought I told you —no secrets."

"…I didn't think it was worth mentioning…"

"And why exactly did you pay him a visit?" Euphie's presence was formidable, warning me that she wouldn't forgive any attempt at deception.

It wasn't long before I succumbed to the pressure and spoke up. "…I wanted to ask about Miss Cyan…"

"…Was that all?"

"And why Navre denounced you…"

"…Why are you looking into things all of a sudden? Did something happen yesterday?"

I tried to keep my mouth shut, but Euphie placed a hand on my cheek, forcing me to look at her. I couldn't remain silent in front of those earnest eyes.

"…My father, well—he said he's going to summon Miss Cyan to see what kind of person she is, and he asked if I'd like to sit in… So I was wondering what she's like…"

"Right when I was away visiting my family?"

"My father, and my mother, too… They didn't want to burden you…"

"…Queen Sylphine as well? So she's returned, I take it?"

Euphie took her hand away from my cheek, placing it on her forehead as she breathed a sigh.

Feeling ill at ease, I let my gaze wander around my workshop.

"…Am I really such a hindrance?"

"Euphie?"

"You're right, I can't exactly say I approve of it all… But I *am* your assistant. I *want* to be your assistant. Yet it's like all I do is cause you trouble. One problem after another. It's disheartening, you know?"

"N-no! You're not a bother! I just didn't want to hurt you! I mean, even this came as a shock, right? I didn't want to put you through that again…" I rose to my feet and placed a hand on Euphie's shoulder.

She pulled that hand to her chest and clutched it between her own hands. "Even so, that's my responsibility to bear… So if you want to help, let me carry it, too. I can't let you shoulder everything."

"…Euphie."

Her hands were trembling slightly, yet her eyes were firm, brimming with resolute light. Really, she was trying too hard to be strong. It wouldn't hurt for her to be a little weaker, but I knew my consideration for her could end up bringing her pain. All in all, it was probably best to go along with her wishes.

"…Sorry for trying to hide it."

"Please, let me carry it with you. It concerns me, after all."

"Right. I understand."

I stepped forward, taking Euphie in my arms. I should have known that she wouldn't be happy simply letting me protect her, but still I wondered whether I should bring up her failed betrothal with her directly.

Even she had said that she wasn't fine with it all. But if she wanted to discuss it, it would be dishonest to hold my tongue.

"…All's well that ends well, I see."

"Ilia?"

At that, Ilia stepped into my workshop. She must have been listening to our conversation. I found myself glaring at her. I could understand that it wasn't a good idea to hide everything from Euphie, but that didn't change the fact that I wouldn't have had to deal with my mixed feelings if not for Ilia's meddling.

Ilia's eyes twinkled a little in mirth, but her face remained otherwise completely expressionless. "I was looking out for you two. Perhaps I overstepped my bounds?"

"No, thank you… Lady Anis, Ilia has been worried about you, too. She said you were brooding over something."

…It was true that I had a lot on my mind, and I *was* the one who was making her worry. I couldn't exactly argue with her. I continued to frown, unable to think of a response.

"I was concerned. It isn't like you to be so distressed, Your Highness," Ilia said.

"Is something wrong?" Euphie asked.

"…I suppose you could say that. Although it's more of a bad feeling than anything concrete," I replied.

"A bad feeling…?" Euphie repeated with a questioning look.

Ilia's reaction, however, was something else—a look of alarm eroded her usually expressionless countenance piece by piece.

"…A premonition? That *does* sound ominous."

"Ilia?" Euphie was still confused.

"Whenever the princess has a premonition, it's usually a harbinger of something extremely unpleasant. She may cause a myriad of problems as a result of her actions, but her intentions are usually good. So whenever she senses something wrong, there's almost certainly malicious intent at play somewhere."

"Really…?" Euphie murmured.

"Every now and then…," I muttered.

It was certainly true that there was usually a malicious actor the previous times that I had felt like this. And that had been the case on quite a few occasions during my time as an adventurer. There had been fraudulent requests, and much more dangerous, more complex conditions that hadn't properly been explained. My premonitions had an uncanny habit of coming true.

Apart from the few particularly dangerous incidents, my hunches usually ended up being the result of some shenanigans or harassment by those big names at the Ministry of the Arcane. As Ilia said, there was no denying that they pointed to malicious intent. Not that I was about to admit that to her, though.

"…But even so, I wonder what's causing it?"

"You don't have any idea, Your Highness?"

"I already said I don't!"

"You were asking after Miss Cyan, weren't you?" Euphie asked.

Hearing that name filled me with a little worry, but I tried not to let it show. "I was just wondering what kind of person she is. It doesn't sound like she's much of a schemer, though…"

"That's what I thought, too… And I don't think she's a bad person, either," Euphie commented.

"You don't?"

"I complained to her about her behavior, but she seemed genuinely remorseful. She listened to my warnings, and from what I could tell, she was trying to improve. Actually, Prince Algard glared at me for bothering her, so I thought it best to let her keep doing as she pleased…"

So Euphie was saying that Lainie Cyan didn't seem like such a bad person to her, either? Was that why so many people ended up taking her side? But that didn't necessarily have to mean that Euphie was in the wrong, did it? It just didn't add up.

"…I guess we still don't have enough information about her…," I murmured.

"Do you think your premonition has to do with Miss Cyan?" Euphie asked.

"…I don't know, but *something* is definitely wrong. Maybe it's the situation itself."

"What do you mean?"

"I wish I could say for sure… Agh, this is a real pain!"

To be clear, my gut told me that something was indeed fishy about all this. Unfortunately, that feeling was incredibly vague and hung heavily over my mind.

"The way everyone sees Lainie Cyan doesn't mesh with the whole situation."

"…You think so?"

"Yep. That's my gut feeling."

"What exactly do you mean, it doesn't *mesh*?"

“From what everyone says—even you yourself, Euphie—Lainie Cyan isn’t the kind of person to ignore advice, and I know people are attracted to her because of her personal circumstances. But why would Allie go so far as to break off his engagement and denounce his betrothed in public for her? That’s something else.”

“…I—I suppose so?”

“That’s what I think. I can’t wrap my head around what he was thinking… Ah, I’m at a complete loss here…”

I just couldn’t pinpoint what had triggered the explosive way in which the situation had unfolded. That was what was making my head spin. Even trying to trace the causes, every piece of potential evidence was completely circumstantial. It was like a fog was blocking me from seeing the answer. I felt queasy.

“If you can’t find an explanation now, why not put it off for the time being? I know it must feel unsettling, but you’ll just exhaust yourself if you keep worrying over it like this,” Ilia said.

“…Hmm, I suppose you’re right.”

“I am. Let’s take a break, Lady Anis.”

Now that both Ilia and Euphie were asking me to put the issue to one side, I couldn’t refuse. I was already making them both worry over me.

All the same, even though the outcome was clear, I couldn’t yet determine the factors that had led to it.

What on earth could have caused such a dramatic end to Euphie and Allie’s engagement? My suspicion that I wouldn’t like what I found was growing stronger by the minute.

At the center of that whirlpool of distrust…was Allie. My estranged younger brother, born of the same blood as me. He was supposed to be this kingdom’s future king and leader.

…Just what are you playing at, Allie…?

My lingering affection for what we had shared in the past pierced my chest. I shook my head to relieve the pain, driving it from my consciousness.

“You look splendid, Your Highness.”

“…Thank you.”

I let out a dejected sigh at my appearance now that Ilia had finished with my makeup. The day of our audience with Miss Cyan had approached in what had felt like no time at all. I needed to look every bit the princess in order to attend.

Even knowing it was required of me, I still didn’t like having to dress up. I breathed one melancholy sigh after another.

“Lady Anis.”

“Euphie.”

Now that I was ready, Euphie stepped into the room to join me. She was wearing her usual plain clothes, as she would be house sitting while I was gone.

“You look beautiful,” she said.

“And you’re a flatterer. I had better get going.”

“…I wish I could join you, but I’m afraid my presence would just cause unnecessary confusion. I’ll be waiting here for you when you get back, Lady Anis.” Euphie looked uneasy.

She seemed concerned about Lainie Cyan. But I had been opposed to her joining me, and I doubted that my mother or my father would give her permission, either. As such, she would remain here until I returned.

“I’ll get to the bottom of this. Hopefully it isn’t too complicated.”

The ominous premonition that had fallen over me the other day had not abated. I hoped that today’s audience would at least help reveal the true source of my discomfort. As such, I had to be sure to take a full measure of Lainie Cyan while I had the chance.

After Euphie saw us off, Ilia and I made our way to the royal palace. Upon our arrival, a maidservant led us to a room, an antechamber used exclusively by the royal family. There, I found my mother elegantly sipping a cup of tea, practically lying in wait for me. I almost spun away from her, but Ilia held me firmly by the shoulders.

“It’s been so long, Queen Sylphine.”

“Ilia. My daughter must be causing you no end of trouble. I’m truly grateful to have you watching over her.”

“Your Majesty is too kind,” Ilia said, removing her hands from my shoulders and curtsying in respect.

My mother smiled back in satisfaction. “Truly, you’re wasted as my daughter’s attendant… I hope you know not to squander her dedication, Anis?”

“I know…,” I grumbled.

“…She’s a headache, albeit in a different sense than Algard.” My mother breathed a resigned sigh.

There was no need for that. I was fully aware that I was indebted to Ilia, and I wanted to reward her for her long service, too. She was one of a very small number of people who were always on my side, and practically family.

“I’ve been thinking about retiring from official duties,” my mother said. “But until you and Algard set yourselves right, that option remains out of reach for me…”

“Huh? Mother? You want to retire?!”

I had been sure that she wanted to remain active her entire life.

Nonetheless, she glared back at me. “Naturally. I can’t sit in the diplomat’s seat forever. I’m not young anymore, and something needs to be done to ensure that the next generation will take the reins.”

“…Do you mean that?”

Most outside observers, judging our appearances alone, would have likely thought that we were sisters, so to be honest, her words just now sounded almost like a joke. On top of that, my mother wasn’t just a diplomat, but a lifelong warrior, too.

“…Oh? So you still see me as pretty and youthful? I’m glad to hear that. Are you eager to work alongside your mother, perhaps?” she teased.

“Don’t misunderstand me! It’s important to pass the baton to future generations in time! I think taking a step back would be a wonderful idea!”

“If you’re going to come out with excuses so quickly, think about what kind of reaction you might receive before opening your mouth. You may have renounced your claim to the throne, but you’re still a member of the royal family. And for someone in as senior a position as yours, it’s necessary to gauge the other party in any conversation and respond accordingly. Are you listening, Anis?”

Argh! Why did she have to lecture me every time we saw each other?! It wasn't fair! I glanced Ilia's way for help, but she wouldn't even meet my gaze. I had been abandoned!

"And you say you want to judge Miss Cyan's character for yourself… Do you understand what I'm saying, Anis?"

"Ugh. Yes…"

"…In that case, what do your instincts tell you?"

I turned serious. It was time to get down to business. "I think at the very least that she doesn't have an agenda."

"I see. But still, something strikes you as out of place, no?"

"I can't really put my finger on it, though."

"Your instincts aren't foolproof, but you have qualities that even I fail to notice, and those are your weapons. Be wary of even the most insignificant details."

"What do *you* think, Mother?"

She stared back at me with narrowed eyes. Outside of my private affairs, I wasn't particularly afraid of her. This was a necessary conversation. It was no time to be shrinking in fear.

After staring at me for a brief moment, she looked away. "I don't know. But it's certainly true that *something* is afoot. I don't have your sense of intuition, but I *do* know when it's prudent to tread lightly."

"…I see."

My unease was really just a gut feeling, but my mother valued that. My father probably did, too, for that matter. No doubt that was why they had asked me to sit in on this occasion.

"Perhaps I shouldn't say this…but it's precisely because of your intuition that I thought you should join us today."

"Mother?"

"You're a wild, unruly daughter, but that doesn't mean we don't trust you. If you notice anything, let us know immediately, understood? Don't rush off and try to solve it by yourself."

"…Yes, Mother. Thank you."

I had to admit, there were times when I didn't get along with her, but I didn't dislike her. She could be incredibly strict, and I couldn't win against her in a confrontation, but she approved of me, even if only a little. She truly did feel like a parent. And because of that, I felt ashamed to look her in the eye.

Since she was family, I wanted to do everything that I could to help. For Euphie's sake, too. I had to get to the bottom of the

situation with Lainie Cyan.

"Sylphine? Anisphia? It's time."

There was a knock on the door, followed by my father entering the room. He had come to ask us to join him.

We left Ilia in the antechamber and entered the audience hall with the rest of the family. There were only a few people inside—a few of my father's vassals serving as guards, along with Commander Sprout of the Royal Guard.

As we waited, I gauged the mood of the room and straightened my back in order to present myself with the dignity expected of a member of the royal family.

At that moment, two newcomers were ushered inside. The first was a man with distinctively dark brown hair, sharp gray eyes, and a large, solid build. His formidable figure was a sight to behold.

In fact, his aristocratic attire struck me as somehow out of place. There could be no mistaking that Baron Dragus Cyan was a former adventurer.

Behind him entered his daughter, Lainie Cyan, who had been standing beside Allie when he had broken off his engagement at that party at the academy.

Her hair was a lustrous black, her gray eyes downcast. Beside Baron Cyan, her slender figure stood out as all the more delicate. Her appearance was ephemeral, her somber countenance filled with melancholy. She was the very image of the proverbial ill-fated beauty.

"Baron Cyan. And your daughter Lainie, too. Thank you for coming," my father called out as the two bowed in respect.

The baron looked rather nervous, so much so that I felt bad for him. Even that huge body of his seemed to be shriveling up in the king's presence.

"Lift your head. You may speak."

Baron Cyan continued to stare at the ground in front of him, perhaps out of desperation. "Ah! Please forgive my unhappy daughter for her disrespectful conduct! Please, be merciful!" He looked ready to fall to his knees and start begging at any moment. His voice as he cried out for clemency was just as frantic as his bearing.

I detected the hint of a frown on my father's face, but it lasted for only a moment before he promptly buried his emotions. Once more, he urged the baron to lift his face. "Calm yourself, Baron

Cyan. The purpose of today's audience is to ascertain the truth. I have no intention of casting blame without first knowing the facts of the matter. So please, put your mind at ease."

"…Ah, my apologies, Your Majesty. Your words are most profound." The baron was still tense, but at least he was making eye contact now. He was haggard. Given his status, he must have recognized that he was in a difficult position. He could well have been as stressed as my own father was currently.

The baron didn't leave me with a bad impression. It was clear that he cared about Lainie. With that in mind, I turned my attention her way. She was still respectfully kneeling, leaving me unable to read her expression.

"There had always been some degree of friction when it came to Algard and Euphie's betrothal," my father said. "I understand that when my son broke it off, he and your daughter had already expressed their affections for each other."

"A-affections…?" Baron Cyan repeated. "That's ridiculous, considering their respective statuses. My daughter might make a good enough mistress, but I can't imagine she would push your heir's legitimate fiancée out of the picture…"

"Are you suggesting that Algard acted entirely by himself?"

"I—I didn't say that! It's true that, as a foundling, Lainie hasn't received the full education expected of a noble daughter. Her deficiencies may have caused His Highness some trouble at the academy, but that doesn't mean they were in a relationship…"

"Yet Algard was driven by righteous indignation on her behalf to break off his betrothal and denounce his fiancée in public. That is a fact. I can't imagine him doing so if there was no affection between him and your daughter."

Baron Cyan's shoulders and frame continued to shrink before us.

My father turned his gaze next to his daughter. "Lainie Cyan, let me see your face."

Lainie did so. She seemed so ethereal, as though she might disappear without any warning. Her expression was tense, but I couldn't read her emotions. Her eyes were lifeless, like an empty void.

By all appearances, she was a lovely young lady. I could understand how, presented with the faintest of smiles, men might be attracted to her sense of fragility. She was beautiful, her hair

similar to Euphie's, albeit of a different hue. Yet as I stared at her, I found it hard to fully believe that she was a living, breathing person. If someone had told me that she was an inanimate doll, I might have even believed them for a brief moment.

"Forgive me for asking this, but I'll be direct… Were or were you not in a relationship with Algard?" my father asked.

The attention of everyone in the room turned to her. Lainie's response was brief. "No."

Her voice was so lovely that for a moment I doubted my own ears. It was mellow, like honey seeping into my mind. That one word practically took control of my senses.

"As someone unworthy, I would never act so untoward. I would be lying if I said I didn't care for Prince Algard, but I would never want to push a bleak future on the royal family."

Everyone listened carefully. It was impossible to look away from her downcast eyes, from the way her lips trembled as she tried to catch her breath.

How long did the resulting silence ensue? Perhaps it was due to Lainie's calming effect on us, but my father relaxed his shoulders, cleared his throat, and said, "…I see. You don't appear to be lying."

An air of calm washed over the room—yet it seemed that I alone was struck by a sense of foreboding.

This feels weird—wrong, almost…

A thin membrane of unease stretched over me. No one said anything in response to my father; they were all accepting the inevitability of the situation. Even my mother was the same.

Everyone was ready to accept that Lainie wasn't at fault. I could tell from their body language that they had already acknowledged as much. The grip of anxiety on me was growing, to the point that I was starting to feel physically sick.

All of a sudden, a hot, feverish sensation burst from a certain area on my back. The heat originated in my skin, coursing through my entire body, making me feel itchy all over. Then, that tingling feeling began to move across my flesh as though with a will of its own.

"Achoo!"

My loud sneeze broke the silence. Everyone's gazes turned from Lainie to me. The strange feeling that had fallen over me disappeared, but in its place, I could sense their displeasure on my skin.

…Uh-oh. Mother has a huge smile on her face. She might kill me later…

Indeed, my mother's smile warned me she might explode here and now. My father's shoulders were trembling in rage, and Baron Cyan was staring at me in shock, too.

Even Miss Lainie was gawking at me, her mouth hanging open.

My father unfroze first. "…Anis… You… You… Every single time…!"

"N-no, Father! Forgive my interruption! I would like to make a suggestion!"

"I've no time for your excuses!"

"It's no excuse! Please, I only need a moment!"

"What?! That you want to blow your nose?!"

"This is no joke! I'm being serious!"

My father and I had locked eyes. He was incensed that I had spoken up, and I was just trying to collect myself.

"Father, can you clear the room first?"

"Excuse me? What is the meaning of this, Anis?"

"I have some questions I'd like to ask Miss Lainie alone. It could be rather personal, so I'd prefer to have as few people in the room as possible."

"Hm…?" Lainie said, the first to react. Her face had gone pale. Perhaps she didn't know why I was singling her out.

"…Do you have any concerns, Anis?"

"I do, Father. I'm offering this advice in my capacity as the royal princess."

"…Hmm…"

I didn't normally play that particular card, but I felt I had to now. My father was at a loss, unsure why I wanted to delve further when his own doubts had disappeared.

My mother nudged him. She glanced my way sternly before placing a hand softly on my father's back. "May I, Your Majesty?"

"Sylphine…?"

"I trust in Anis's instincts. If she's willing to go this far, perhaps she's sensed something. It should be acceptable to confirm the details with her afterward."

He raised an eyebrow. He looked back and forth from me to Miss Lainie before letting out a small snort.

But before he could make his decision, Baron Cyan stepped forward. "W-wait a moment, Princess Anisphia! My daughter isn't involved in any plot…!"

"Please, calm yourself, Baron Cyan. I don't intend to accuse Miss Lainie of anything," I explained.

“Nonetheless—”

“Trust me, please. I won’t harm her.”

People would normally complain that my word wasn’t particularly trustworthy, but this time, I was using my title of princess as a shield. To be fair, my mother’s declaration of support was a great help here.

Everyone gathered in the hall whispered among themselves in reaction to my request. They didn’t seem particularly receptive, but after my mother had given her support, it would be difficult for them to oppose me too directly.

Then a single complaint came from another person present. “Is this request not rather sudden, Princess Anisphia?”

“…Count Chartreuse.”

Count Chartreuse, the director of the Ministry of the Arcane, was a well-dressed man with a strong physique and a mane of silver hair. His hand rested on his rotund belly. Was that bulge the result of his age, or rather a lack of daily exercise? Or perhaps a life of wealth and affluence was to blame? In any event, his figure was noticeable.

He looked rather calm at first glance, but I knew that that was simply for show. He had always hated me, had always spoken out against me, and was in a very real sense my mutual enemy. Nonetheless, his position as the director of the Ministry of the Arcane, and as one of my father’s advisers, kept him here in the palace.

Count Chartreuse examined others in the audience gathered in the hall. “Is it not a frightening suggestion, clearing the room to interrogate a frail young lady? Would you not be terrified yourselves?”

I responded to his cynical tone of voice with a false smile. “I recognize what you’re saying, Count Chartreuse, but there’s something I believe no one else has noticed, hence why I would like to speak with Miss Lainie. I wouldn’t want to bring suspicion on her if I’m mistaken. After all, the opinions of a member of the royal family carry too much weight to be aired in public. As such, I would like to speak to her alone.”

“Suspicions? Princess Anisphia, are you saying you suspect Lady Cyan of malicious intent?” Count Chartreuse narrowed his eyes in distrust.

I steeled myself to withstand that pressure. “Do you object to

my request, Count Chartreuse?"

"…No. I'm simply wondering why you're so adamant to speak with her in private. I'm merely concerned that you might threaten her for the sake of your ward, Lady Euphyllia."

The air turned frigid—and none in the room was colder than me.

"…Will that be all, Count Chartreuse?" My voice was so icy, something I found strange about myself. My head was awfully cool compared to the seething, boiling rage churning in the pit of my stomach. "I am here as a member of the royal family, and I am conducting myself as such. Can I trust that you recognize that, Count Chartreuse?"

The count's eyebrows shot up for a moment. I had dared to remind him of my position. Was he comfortable challenging a member of my family?

"…Of course. Your Highness is most considerate. My advice may have been prompted by an error in judgment."

"In that case, you're worrying unnecessarily. My role here is to get to the bottom of this situation. For that reason, I will not rashly take sides. Once again, I swear neither to harm nor to threaten Miss Lainie." I clenched my fist and held it against my chest.

Not even the director of the Ministry of the Arcane would be able to ignore this declaration using the same gesture as when one prayed to the spirits. As I expected, the count's face contorted most spectacularly.

"The princess has given her word. In that case, shall we give her the room?" Duke Grantz said, trying to defuse the situation.

"Duke Magenta…"

After briefly glancing my way, the duke turned next to my father, and that finally got through to him.

My father looked first at Duke Grantz, then at me, before finally turning his eyes to everyone else gathered. "I'll permit it. Let's prepare a space for Anis and Miss Lainie to speak. Clear the room, everyone."

The gathered nobles fell silent. It was clear how my father felt. One by one, they bowed and filed out from the audience hall. Count Chartreuse, the last one to leave, left without saying a further word.

"P-please, allow me to remain, Princess Anisphia!" Baron Cyan pleaded on his knees in front of me.

With the room now almost empty, he approached me in

desperate supplication.

Miss Lainie, herself filled with visible anxiety, was staring at her father.

I sighed gently and knelt down in front of the baron to meet his gaze. “Baron Cyan, I really have no intention at all of causing your daughter any harm. Could you please trust me and wait outside?”

“…But…!”

“Baron Cyan. It would be most disrespectful to object further. Why don’t you join me outside?” Duke Grantz reprimanded.

“Duke Magenta…”

The baron fell silent, perhaps realizing that he could resist no longer now that even the duke had spoken out, but he was still deeply upset. He continued to stare worriedly at his daughter as he left the hall.

Finally, only my father, my mother, Miss Lainie, and I remained. Miss Lainie was trembling in fear, her face so pale that I feared that she might even collapse. Taking in the situation, I turned next to my parents.

“I’m sorry, Father, Mother. I’d like to confirm something in private first, so could you excuse us both for a moment?”

“You don’t want us present, either?” my mother asked.

“Correct. Ilia will be with us, so please don’t worry.”

“…Very well. Inform us the moment you’ve addressed your concerns. Understood?”

I nodded.

Next, I approached Miss Lainie, who continued to watch me—and she was still terrified.

“It’s nice to meet you, Miss Lainie,” I said. “I’m not in the best position to offer you encouragement…but I want you to come with me for a second. This is for your own benefit, all right?”

“…Yes,” she responded with a small nod as she tried to hide her trembling.

I took her by the hand and escorted her from the audience hall to the antechamber, where Ilia was waiting. As she let me lead her to the adjoining room, Miss Lainie was quivering the whole time. I was trying to be conscious of her trepidation, so I ushered her into the antechamber.

“…Princess? What happened?” Ilia, waiting inside, approached us both with a look of consternation.

When she noticed whom I had brought with me, her expression

became even more puzzled.

"Hold on, it's all right. Miss Lainie, let's take a seat first."

Miss Lainie nodded her head mechanically as she sat in the chair. I could hear her trembles shake the seat. As much as I hated to admit it, she was clearly anxious. Ilia must have been concerned, as she was watching on with a frown.

"Sorry about calling you in here all of a sudden, but there's something I need to confirm with you," I began.

"Confirm…?" Miss Lainie asked.

"I want to know a little more about you."

"…Um, I really didn't do anything…!" She shook her head, her complexion pale.

I was aware that this was probably a considerable mental burden on her, but I couldn't simply nod along in agreement.

"I want you to trust me, so we can *prove* that… Ah, all right. I know you don't believe me. Let's treat this as a command from your princess. I expect you to obey my instructions."

I had framed this as a royal order.

Miss Lainie shrank back, her eyes wet with tears. She was terrified.

"I know I'm being rude. I'll apologize all you want later. But I think your position will be in danger if we don't clarify a few things while we can."

"…I—I…"

"*Yes* will do for an answer. All right?"

"…Yes." Miss Lainie stared down at the floor, her voice filled with desperation.

I walked around behind her and gently placed a hand on her back.

"Aaaah! Wh-what…?"

"Shhh. I'm not going to do anything."

"B-but…"

I ignored her reaction, slowly running my fingertips down her body, tracing her spine, then her shoulders, her arms, and each finger in turn. "…Excuse me."

"Eeek!"

Next, I placed my hands against her chest. She let out an adorable scream, but I held her from behind so that she couldn't move.

"…Oh. That'll do."

Still standing behind her, I slowly released her from my grip.

Miss Lainie hugged her body, staring up at me through teary eyes. She was ready to sob.

It had been necessary to confirm my suspicions, but still, I'm sure touching her chest didn't make her feel any better. I took a deep breath, then let it out. The next question was going to be a little awkward.

"Miss Lainie? What I'm going to ask you now is going to sound a little crazy."

"…What do you mean…?" She was on edge, still hugging herself tightly.

I tried to find the right words, but I could find no delicate way to put it, so I decided on a straightforward approach. "Are you aware that you're using some kind of magic?"

"…Huh?" she gasped in surprise. At a complete loss, she shook her head.

"…I see. So you're not doing it on purpose. This is going to be a bother…"

"Um, er, you're saying I'm using magic…?"

"You weren't aware of it? You were trying to influence my mind a moment ago, no?"

"…Huh?"

"You're even doing it right now. It's kind of creepy. You've probably cast the same spell over everyone in the audience hall. But let's be honest, that's no ordinary magic, is it?"

"Huh…?! I—I—I don't know anything! I didn't *do* anything!" Her face had turned almost pure white as she shook her head. She barely had a grip on herself at this point.

I placed my hands on her shoulders, trying to keep her seated. "Yes, I understand! I know you're not doing it consciously! And I think I've figured out the cause!"

"The cause…?"

"Miss Lainie, I don't think you're a regular person."

She froze in place. I had a feeling she couldn't comprehend what I had just said. Her gray eyes were wide open, tears ready to fall.

"…N-not a…r-regular person…?"

"What do you mean, Princess?" Ilia asked.

"This is why I wanted to confirm something away from everyone else. It looks like I was right… Um, Miss Lainie? Could

you hear me out, calmly and quietly? I think there's a piece of magicite embedded in your heart."

Even Ilia stood petrified by this announcement. She and Miss Lainie were in total shock.

"M-magicite…? Huh? Why would…?"

"…Are you saying she's a monster…?" Ilia murmured with a look of astonishment.

Miss Lainie's face twitched in horror.

Normally, only monsters had pieces of magicite embedded inside their bodies. Certainly, no human should have been in possession of one. In other words, there was a distinct possibility that Miss Lainie wasn't human. That should have been impossible, so I could understand their surprise. I was astonished, too.

"It's really just a coincidence that I noticed it. I happened to apply a technique to let me resist Miss Lainie's magic. But she doesn't seem to have been using it consciously. You were probably unaware of the magicite in the first place, right?"

"Th-that's… I—I'm…not human…?"

"I don't know. I can't really say for sure just yet, which is why I wanted to talk to you in private. I didn't want to cause any misunderstandings."

"…This was for my sake…?" Miss Lainie allowed herself to finally relax. Either her doubts were cleared, or she'd recognized that I indeed meant her no harm.

"Yes. It seems that the magicite crystal inside you responds to your thoughts. It probably has the power to make people like you or want to protect you… Basically, I think it charms them."

"…It does?" Miss Lainie repeated, stunned and wide-eyed.

I nodded. "Right. If that's what it is, that explains my sense of unease. It's probably because they're charmed that people want to take your side so often, that they want to protect you…"

"Really?! So there's actually a reason people like me so much?!" All of a sudden, Miss Lainie grabbed me with her hands.

I caught her softly, staring into her bewildered eyes. "M-Miss Lainie?"

"What should I do?! Have I been charming people with this power all this time?!"

"I'm not entirely sure… But if you weren't aware of it, I suppose there's a good chance you were…"

Miss Lainie fell back into her chair, drained, dumbfounded, and

crying. Her soul had practically left her body.

"I—I—I… People have always…always liked me… But then they get so mean, they turn against each other… A-and…th-they bully me… I—I've always been so scared… I've always wished they would leave me alone. I've always tried not to stand out… And yet…!"

I didn't know how to respond now that she had started bawling and covering her face with her hands. But before I could make a move, Ilia wrapped an arm around her shoulder, embracing her in a hug.

At that, Miss Lainie couldn't hold back any further. She wept, tears streaming down her face. It was heartbreaking and nearly made me frown. Yep, from her standpoint, too, this was undoubtedly a major problem.

…But it was a little surprising to see that Ilia cared for her so strongly. She seemed to have naturally taken Miss Lainie's side, perhaps having been lulled by that charm. Those powers were unquestionably real.

Ah, that was a close call…

The magicite crystal inside her body granted her the unique power to captivate those around her. Since I had realized that something was amiss earlier, I'd consulted with Tilty in advance and prepared a countermeasure. Without that, I would undoubtedly have found myself won over by her.

…Yep. If the timing had been off even by a fraction, I would have been ensnared in that charm.

Not even my mother, let alone my father, had realized what was happening. Nor had the students attending the Aristocratic Academy. There was no mistaking that Miss Lainie's power was too dangerous. Just what would happen if it was left alone?

"…Princess?" Ilia glanced up at me as she patted Miss Lainie's back.

I couldn't just leave everything the way that it was, but what were my options? First, I would have to report to my father, but then…?

Once Miss Lainie had regained her composure, I asked Ilia to bring my father and mother in.

Miss Lainie had been crying so much that her eyes were now swollen red, sniffling as she waited patiently.

"…How do you feel?" I asked.

"…I'm sorry for getting so upset," she replied.

"It's all right. Anyone would after that kind of revelation."

"Yes…but I am kind of relieved…"

"You are?"

"…I always make everyone go so crazy. Now I finally understand why…" Miss Lainie let out a weak laugh.

My heart went out to her. She seemed like such a pure and good-natured girl, completely at odds with her unique powers.

But should she really be feeling *relief* upon realizing that she was capable of driving people mad like that?

"…Has it happened a lot?" I asked.

"Yes. Did you know I used to live at an orphanage? That was when it all started."

"An orphanage… I did hear something about your father finding you in such a place. But what about your mother?"

"I traveled from place to place with her at first, but she died while I was very young, so I was sent to the orphanage."

"…I had no idea."

There was a good chance that she had inherited her magicite crystal from her mother. It was a shame that she had passed away but, at the same time, perhaps a small relief. If she had possessed the same powers as her daughter…

"Princess, I've brought His Majesty and the queen," Ilia said, dredging me out of my thoughts.

My father and mother entered behind her, startled to see that Miss Lainie had been crying.

"Anis, have you learned anything?" my father asked.

"Yes. Mother, Father, please listen to what I have to say and don't overreact."

I sat up straight and told them about the magicite crystal inside Miss Lainie's body. When I came to the part about her powers of enchantment, they each stared back at me in disbelief.

"Unheard of… A person possessed of magicite…?"

"Correct, but those powers aren't under her direct control. I think she's been exerting that force unconsciously, causing others to have disagreements and sowing strife without meaning to."

"…I see." My father let out a tired sigh, placing a hand against his forehead—another headache of his.

I felt like letting out a sigh, too.

Now that my father had fallen silent, it was my mother who

picked up the reins, turning to me with a serious expression. “I think I understand the situation. So what do you suggest we do, Anis?”

“…Indeed. First, I think we need to find a way to control Miss Lainie’s abilities.”

“Yet they sound dangerous. It’s a good thing you recognized them for what they are, but neither your father nor I was able to notice. That kind of power could endanger the whole realm.”

Miss Lainie trembled slightly at the harm she could unknowingly cause. Ilia moved to support her pale, trembling figure. My mother glanced at Miss Lainie briefly, before turning back to me.

This power truly was dangerous. It could prove fatal if one didn’t realize that they had fallen under her spell. There was already so much havoc without her trying to hurt anyone.

I could understand my mother’s concern—this power could, after all, be used to intentionally bewitch someone. To make matters worse, if Miss Lainie was doing so unintentionally, it meant it was impossible for her to control. In that case, the best course of action might simply be to nip the problem in the bud here and now.

“Even so, I’m opposed to eliminating Miss Lainie.”

“And why is that?”

“Because she’s living proof that this sort of thing is possible. There may be others out there with similar powers to hers. Therefore, it’s in the best interest of the kingdom that we learn everything we can from her abilities.”

It would be a relief if Miss Lainie’s abilities truly were unique, if there were no others like her out there. But if they did exist, we couldn’t afford to eliminate her.

Fortunately, Miss Lainie herself was a kindhearted and good young lady. I doubted that she would object to being placed under protection if it was for the good of the realm. And it would certainly be best to get her cooperation to study and analyze her abilities.

“How can we be sure she will be able to control those powers in the future?” my mother asked.

“In that case, how about we put her under my guardianship? *I* can watch over her and supervise her, seeing as I’ve managed to resist her spell, no?” I offered.

On top of that, Miss Lainie’s abilities stemmed from a magicite crystal. That was worth studying as well. There were a great many

merits in my protecting her.

My mother stared fixedly my way for a long moment before closing her eyes, and she let out a deep sigh. "…You're right. But it's also true that she remains dangerous. If she becomes too much for you to handle, we'll have to take care of her. You'll be taking on a heavy responsibility, Anis. Do you understand what that means?"

"Yes. I'll shelter her and take full responsibility."

My mother rested a hand against her forehead and slumped forward. She looked rather tired. I knew that what I was asking would cause everyone a headache, and so I couldn't bring myself to say anything further.

"…Considering Algard, I don't think it wise to leave her in your custody, but I can't see any other option. Let's try to keep this a secret and ensure that Miss Lainie's abilities remain strictly confidential. What do you think?" My mother looked to my father for confirmation.

"…Indeed. I understand your fears, Sylphine, but we'll be better off if Miss Lainie can control her powers in the future." My father nodded.

Hearing my parents' responses, I let out a sigh of relief knowing that Miss Lainie wouldn't be executed on the spot.

"But who do we tell, and how much? Obviously, we can't reveal everything, and we'll have to be especially selective about who to let in," my mother remarked.

"Hmm. I'll speak to Grantz, and I'll have to explain the situation to Baron Cyan," my father added. "We can't let it be known that she'll be under *your* care, Anis, so we'll need to keep our stories straight. Perhaps we should pretend she needs to leave home for a while to recuperate after some kind of illness. We can let her stay at your villa in secret?"

"Commander Sprout's son was part of the group who denounced Euphyllia. The commander is already involved, so we might as well bring him in," my mother suggested.

I was no good when it came to political bargaining, so I left my parents to sort out the details by themselves. In any event, my villa at the detached palace was ideal both to protect Miss Lainie and to shelter her from public scrutiny. There was the added advantage that only a very limited number of people were permitted in and out, so she would be less likely to be discovered. After all, very few people actively tried to seek me out.

I could spend that time examining her and devising some means of countering her powers. To be honest, this would be a great opportunity for me, so there was very little holding me back.

"I'm sorry, Miss Lainie, but your only real choice here is to agree to all this," I said.

"No, I'm just sorry I've caused you all so much trouble… I'll do anything you ask." Her face was still pale, but her resolve to accept my protection was clear.

All the same, the fact that she possessed a magicite crystal was an unbelievable revelation. I knew that it was imprudent of me, but frankly, I was bubbling with excitement at the idea of taking her under my wing.

"I know this won't be easy, Anis…," my mother said. "But you can do it."

"Of course! This will be an interesting phenomenon to study! I can feel the weight of this responsibility, but I'm raring to go!"

"…That attitude of yours is hardly appropriate, Anis." My mother breathed a stunned sigh.

"Huh?"

As I tilted my head to one side in confusion, my mother glared back at me. "Keeping Miss Lainie at your villa could cause a major incident, no?"

"An incident?"

"Tell me, who else do you have staying with you at present?"

"…Oh."

Right, Euphie is living in my villa, too…! Even if I explained the situation to her, even if she accepted it for what it was, could I really ask them both to live under the same roof?

I glanced at Miss Lainie, sitting awkwardly across from me. Ilia, still supporting her from behind, stared down her nose at me as though faced with a vile insect.

…H-huh? H-how did it end up like this…?

* * *

"Ah… Is that so?"

The decision was made to place Miss Lainie under my protection at the detached palace. She had to prepare before moving in, and she needed time to explain the situation to her

father, so she would be joining us here at a later date.

In the meantime, I had just informed Euphie about our new guest… Her reaction had been remarkably simple. She'd been taken aback, as though the wind had been knocked out of her.

Surprisingly, I was the one who was left most at a loss. I stared at her, waiting for what might come next.

Perhaps having noticed my gaze, Euphie broke into a frown. "I understand the situation. She was unaware of her ability and the trouble that it was causing, so I don't hold a grudge against her. In fact, it's very rare for someone to have a piece of magicite inside them, and seeing as you're unaffected by it, it's perfectly logical that she should be placed under your care."

"…And are *you* all right with that, Euphie?"

"It doesn't matter what I think. It's the right thing to do."

She truly did seem to believe it, but I was concerned by her reaction. This was one of those moments I could see why Navre and his friends had described her as cold and uninviting.

Euphie truly didn't feel any animosity toward Lainie. Rather, now that she understood Lainie's circumstances, her desire to keep Miss Lainie safe was completely genuine.

Any normal person would have been incensed. Because of Lainie, not only had she lost her fiancé, but her reputation had also been ruined. Despite that, Euphie wasn't angry. She understood it wasn't fair to put the blame on Lainie in this situation.

She had abandoned what she had every right to feel, all in the pursuit of perfection. If she had been our queen, her course of action would have been laudable, but as an individual, it struck me as inexplicably *wrong*.

"Lady Anis?" she asked, confused by my silence.

"Mmm…? I just thought you might get angry or something, Euphie."

"Ah…" She frowned, not sure what to say. My words sank in, and she seemed to recognize why I thought she was acting oddly. Her expression darkened.

On impulse, I reached out to her and stroked her hair.

She jumped slightly at the sudden touch, but she still allowed me to continue. I sighed, relieved to see that she was a little less on edge now.

"Do you think you'll be all right when she joins us here?" I asked after pulling my hand away.

Euphie combed her slightly mussed hair with her fingers and nodded. “Yes. I truly do not feel one way or another about her. In fact, I almost feel sorry for her. Looking back, it does all seem to make sense now…”

“She may have been unaware, but she was powerful enough to charm a member of the royal family… And it seems to have been happening for quite some time, too.”

“That…does sound difficult. If it’s indiscriminate, that would suggest that countless people have been predisposed toward her, right? It must be a serious problem for her personally. At the academy, there were plenty of incidents that seemed to revolve around her in one way or another. Everyone always claimed to want to help her, but if they were charmed in that way, it doesn’t necessarily mean it was what she wanted.”

So there were other incidents?

I thought it was probably natural to consider it an indiscriminate and uncontrollable force. If people were always trying to help her for no good reason, it was no wonder that Miss Lainie didn’t feel worthy of their goodwill.

It had to be difficult feeling a pressure to constantly accept those displays of emotion. Anyone who believed that she hadn’t adequately responded to their affection might even lash out for the perceived betrayal. I felt awful for her.

Then something else came to mind. “…Come to think of it, don’t you think you’ve probably been charmed by her, too, to some extent, Euphie?”

“It’s true that I’ve always liked her. Is that because I’ve been under her spell? If it seemed to others like I was unaffected, that was probably just because I’ve been brought up to hide my emotions when dealing with people.”

“For better or worse. It could also mean her charming ability wasn’t quite powerful enough for you.”

Based on all this, it sounded like there wouldn’t be a problem for Euphie and Lainie to meet. I had been worried initially about what could happen. To be honest, they were both victim to events outside their control.

…But no matter how influenced he might have been by her, Allie is still at fault for allowing himself to drown in his infatuation.

After learning the truth about Miss Lainie’s abilities to charm people, my father and mother had been at a loss as to how to deal

with Allie. At a minimum, they would no doubt try to keep him in the palace until we could fully explain her powers.

And if Miss Lainie herself could bring those abilities under control, it might even be possible to alleviate their effects. At the very least, we could probably say that Allie hadn't been in a sound state of mind when he had done what he had.

…Seriously, Allie! How could you be so stupid?

* * *

Miss Lainie was ready to join us at the villa. She arrived quietly in secret so that no one would be aware of her presence, and she was acting incredibly furtive.

She was standing before Euphie, and with the circumstances as they were, her anxiety was understandable. They had never directly quarreled, but it must have been awkward for them both, considering that Euphie had fallen out with her betrothed over her.

On top of that, from Miss Lainie's perspective, Euphie was of a higher social status, so she no doubt felt particularly guilty over how events had unfolded. She was clearly tense and frightened, and Euphie was expressionless as she greeted her. She wasn't acting cold—she just wasn't projecting emotion. Watching from the sidelines, I was the one kept in suspense.

"Well… We're all going to be living together from today on, so here's to getting along!" I said with exaggerated cheer, but neither of the girls so much as responded.

Just as I was wondering what to do next, Euphie finally spoke up. "Miss Lainie?"

She recoiled and jerked her head toward Euphie, who remained expressionless. The two reminded me of a frog and a serpent.

"…I'm sorry. I'm not quite sure what would be an appropriate response at a time like this," Euphie said.

"Huh…?"

"I've heard about your situation. I suspected you would be worried whether or not I was actually upset. I'm not sure whether I should blame you or forgive you. I've been trying to figure out what would make you feel most at ease, but I'm truly at a loss…"

"R-really?! Please don't! You don't need to apologize, Lady Euphyllia! It's all my fault…" Miss Lainie shook her head in a

frenzy. She must have been thrown into a deep confusion seeing the daughter of a duke, someone of a much higher status than she was, apologizing when she bore no fault of her own.

"Miss Lainie, did you act with the intention of harming me? Do you blame yourself for something you did?"

"No! I would never! I've never once wanted to hurt you, Lady Euphyllia!"

"In that case, it would be unreasonable of me to blame you for the misfortune you were born with. I don't hold any grudge against you for what happened," Euphie said gently, trying to calm her. "You're here because you need help, too, so I can't abandon you in your time of need."

Euphie rose to her feet, approached Miss Lainie, and took her hands in her own. She stared across at our new guest, her expression softer than it had been a moment earlier. Miss Lainie seemed unsure how to respond.

Euphie remained quiet. Miss Lainie looked as though she wanted to speak, but she couldn't get her words out. Tears streamed down her cheeks. She rested her forehead against Euphie's hand. I suspected she was resisting the urge to cling on to her.

"I'm…sorry…! I've ruined your life, Lady Euphyllia…!"

"It isn't all bad. Maybe I shouldn't say this as a former queen-to-be, but, well…I'm happy now. So I want you to have a happy future, too."

Forgiveness and acceptance. Those two qualities might have sounded easy, but actually putting them into practice took strong character. Euphie exhibited both of them so naturally. She was incredible. She had enormous strength.

I had little doubt that what Miss Lainie needed most was Euphie's encouragement especially. And there she was, clinging to her hand, sobbing and speechless.

Miss Lainie must have realized that coming here would be full of unknowns, and she had to have been terrified of the looming reality. Even if she had been swept along by a force outside her control, she must have been anxious about having to atone for the future that she had ended up destroying.

It was all well and good to want to show remorse, but it could be interpreted as a selfish desire to be rid of guilt unless the other party accepted that apology. That was why Euphie had offered her forgiveness, and why Lainie had so desperately needed it. From

where I was standing, this was the optimal outcome.

"…I'm sorry. I must look a mess…" Miss Lainie sniffled as she rubbed her face. Her eyes were red and swollen, but overall she seemed far more at ease.

We took our seats around a small table. Before I knew it, Ilia had prepared tea, and we each sipped from our cups. *Ahhh, as delicious as ever.*

"It's going to be difficult from here on out, Miss Lainie, but having invited you to join us, I want you to consider us your friends. You can count on us if you have any problems, all right?" I said.

"Yes, Your Highness. Thank you."

"Call me Anis. And I'll call you Lainie."

Lainie stared back in awe—but it was only natural to follow the rules of the house. I hated it when people stood on ceremony when we were in private.

With that, life in the detached palace became a little livelier.

* * *

"She's as inscrutable as ever," murmured a voice from the darkness.

Another voice, one filled with frustration, responded, "What are you going to do? To think that she's actually making a move… At this rate, the plan—"

"She has a devilish habit of interfering with whatever we devise."

Fingers drummed against a desk in an echoing *tap, tap, tap*. The room was dimly lit, the faint light strong enough only to highlight the contours of a person's face.

"There's no change to the plan, but we must push it forward. The last thing we need is for her to fall into *her* hands. I should have known she would be the one to stymie us."

"…What do you intend to do?"

"She's a nuisance, but she isn't infallible." The lights flickered as the silhouette who'd just spoken began to move, melting into the darkness. "There are a great many opportunities ready for us to take advantage of. That is precisely why we so seldom come out into the open."

"…Indeed. In that case, which should we make use of?"

“The most effective approach would be to pick at those treasures she’s so fond of. Given her personality, that will give her no choice but to emerge. And then, we shall snatch her. Outside of her den, she has few allies.”

“…Then it shall be done… We can’t afford to fail.”

The figures blended into the darkness as they departed in turn until only one remained, accompanied by a whisper.

“This is our final chance… We can’t afford to fail this time.”

The light flickered one final time before going out, and the darkness hid the shape of the last one in the room.

CHAPTER 3

"Hmm? So this is the beautiful young lady who stole the hearts of many a nobleman's son?" Tilty asked as she peered into Lainie's terrified face.

We were in Tilty's laboratory at the Claret mansion—Euphie, Ilia, Lainie, me, and Tilty herself.

Now that we were sheltering Lainie at my villa, I had brought her to see Tilty for a physical examination. I also wanted to lean a little on Tilty's extensive knowledge.

Incidentally, my father and the others had agreed to let Tilty in on Lainie's secret. She may have been a troublemaker, but at the same time, she was an incredibly capable scholar in the fields of alchemy and medicine. Additionally, she had a strong understanding of my study of magicology, so there was no problem winning support to bring her into our circle.

"Hold on, Tilty. Don't frighten her so much. Lainie is a delicate soul."

"Yes, yes. But humans imbued with magicite are rare specimens indeed. I never would have even thought it possible," Tilty said, examining her with admiration.

Lainie shrank back in the face of her examiner, perhaps perplexed by her noble status.

Tilty made a strange face. "…Hmm, I see. I wouldn't have noticed if you hadn't mentioned it. It's been a long time since I've felt so guilty."

"So the charm affects you, too, Tilty…? And why would *you* of all people feel guilty?"

I had explained the effects of Lainie's magicite to her in advance. It was no exaggeration to say that she was a morally bankrupt individual, but she did seem to feel some human empathy toward Lainie. And she did seem quite impressed with her inner strength.

"There's magic out there, rare though it is, that can influence people's thoughts—but I've never heard of anything able to so deftly manipulate their emotions. It certainly wouldn't be an easy thing to pull off. It's even more incredible how difficult it is to

notice."

"Psychological manipulation *is* your specialty, I suppose, isn't it?"

Tilty excelled at dark-type magic. The attributes of light and darkness were on par with the four main types of elemental magic in potency, though their effects tended to be much less readily apparent.

Light promoted healing, growth, and the strengthening of one's powers. Darkness influenced mental stability, could inhibit certain activities, and could restrain a target in certain ways. The properties of light and darkness may have been polar opposites, but what they shared was an ability to interfere with the unseen realm.

Euphie, of course, was capable of wielding both. Nonetheless, she told me that she couldn't handle the kind of magic capable of bewitching people's hearts and winning their affection as Lainie did. In other words, Lainie's magic proved the existence of powers and abilities that couldn't be produced through traditional magic.

"So you evoke this ability to charm unconsciously?" Tilty asked.

"Y-yes. I never even knew I had this power…," Lainie answered.

"Hmm? So it's triggered reflexively, then. It sounds more and more like magicite magic."

"Magicite magic?" Euphie echoed, tilting her head to one side in wonder.

At this response, Tilty raised a finger into the air. "It's strongly bound to the mode of life of monsters. In essence, you could say it's activated intuitively. And magicite is most effective when it interacts with its host's survival and defensive instincts. Such abilities are typical of monsters that are forced to live in harsh environments."

"And it's a defensive instinct, making people fond of you. Just as it works in Lainie's situation," I added.

"…I see. That does make sense." Euphie nodded. She agreed with this hypothesis.

It stood to reason that Lainie's unique form of magic was activated when she was under stress. Her charming ability could be regarded as an unwitting magical response to an instinctive need to defend herself.

"She might not activate it so much in a stable environment, but she was born a commoner, presumably unfamiliar with aristocratic life, no? It wouldn't be surprising if that had put her under a lot of

stress…”

“That’s… I mean…” Lainie struggled to articulate herself, but what she offered was silent affirmation.

She hadn’t been in immediate mortal danger, but the burden placed on her must have been considerable.

I found that conclusion plausible; the magicite within her probably activated in conjunction with her defensiveness—thus the charm. I didn’t want to say anything bad about Baron Cyan, but he did seem to have been put in an *extremely* precarious position! One wrong move and the fate of the entire kingdom could have hung in the balance.

“You made the right call, bringing her to your detached palace. That should minimize her contact with others. And even better, she won’t have to keep trying to act like a noblewoman all the time, right?” Tilty said.

“I see…,” Lainie murmured.

I had, of course, informed Baron Cyan of the situation before bringing his daughter to my residence. He had seemed both surprised and pained beyond imagining. As I wanted to shelter her for her own safety, he had bowed profusely to me in thanks.

“My father, my stepmother, and all the servants and retainers—I know they’re all good people, but still…”

After Lainie’s birth mother had disappeared, her father had been awarded the title of baron in recognition of his feats as an adventurer. He had apparently married his wife at around that time, the youngest daughter of a viscount.

Considering that Lainie had lived in an orphanage for much of her childhood, later having a stepmother from the nobility must have been extremely difficult for her. I imagined things had been hard for the new Baroness Cyan, too. However, the baroness had done her best to make Lainie feel at home in the new household, from what I’d heard. She seemed to have a welcoming personality.

Now that she had learned about her innate powers, Lainie was probably riddled with self-doubt, shackled to spiraling thoughts about how that motherly affection might have been influenced by her charm ability. For that reason, not even her father—Baron Cyan—had known what to do next, so he had entrusted his daughter to me with a broken heart.

I wanted to help bring Lainie’s magicite powers under control as soon as possible. If we wanted to keep her safe mentally and

physically, we had to treat this as an urgent matter.

"…By the way, Lady Anis?" Tilty began.

"What?"

"I don't suppose this could be…*that*, if you know what I mean?"

"…So you had the same idea, Tilty."

The two of us exchanged glances. After learning about Lainie's magicite, I had struck on a theory, though I had refrained from voicing it out loud without confirmation.

But Tilty had come to the same conclusion, which meant that there was a strong chance that my suspicions had been on the mark.

I frowned, while Tilty stared into Lainie's face with naked curiosity.

"Um…?" Lainie muttered.

"It would be awfully ironic if you really are what we think," I murmured.

"And what *are* you both thinking?" Ilia asked on everyone's behalf.

I fell silent, unsure how to respond—when Tilty retrieved a small key from a drawer of her work desk.

"I used to love those stories. How strange to be proven this certain something actually exists by meeting you. Just hold on a minute, I need to go get something." Tilty left the room, key in hand.

At that moment, everyone turned to me.

"Lady Anis?" Ilia asked.

"…Honestly, this is pretty unbelievable," I replied in awe.

"As it always is," Ilia said flatly.

"That was uncalled for!" I cried back, resting a hand on my forehead as I tried to control my breathing. "You're all familiar with stories of vampires, right? Like in fairy tales?"

"Vampires?"

The only one who had a strange reaction to this declaration was Lainie. Euphie and Ilia both went pale from shock, but Lainie was glancing around at us, confused.

"Well, vampires are fairy-tale monsters known for drinking people's blood," I said.

According to such fairy tales, vampires tended to take the form of handsome young men or attractive young ladies. They possessed unparalleled beauty for seducing those around them, and no one could escape their influence. These beautiful monsters loved to

drink people's blood, and the victims of such attacks ended up becoming vampires themselves.

"Vampires are fairy-tale monsters known for deceiving people. They increase their numbers under cover of darkness. Those are the kinds of stories you tell when you want to get children to do as they're told," I explained.

"…Come to mention it, the princess *was* madly devouring everything she could find about vampires in folklore and legend," Ilia said, clasping her hands together in realization.

True. I've done a lot of research on vampire tales, so I'm over the moon to find that they do exist in the real world! I remember other stories of such creatures from my past life, and so the more I read about them, the more I want to actually find them.

"Are you saying I'm a vampire?" Lainie asked.

I didn't know precisely how to answer, so I decided to deflect. "Hmm… In a way. But then again, not exactly."

This time, both of them frowned quizzically.

"What do you mean exactly?" Euphie asked.

Tilty reentered the room with an old book in hand as she answered, "Vampire folklore isn't merely myth—it's based on real-life experiences."

"What's that, Tilty?"

"A forbidden book."

"Forbidden?!" Euphie exclaimed, staring back at her in disbelief.

Lainie seemed to grow terrified at the sound of Euphie's raised voice. "Um, forbidden…?" she repeated.

"She means a book banned by the authorities, one that the Kingdom of Palettia has been cracking down on. It no doubt describes ideas and techniques that are subject to certain restrictions," I explained before turning to Tilty. "If they knew you had this, you could get in a lot of trouble."

Lainie stared back at the forbidden book, her eyes wide in shock as she grasped why Euphie had responded as strongly as she had. "Are you sure you should have something like that?!" she exclaimed.

"Of course not. If they found it, they would confiscate it immediately," Tilty answered matter-of-factly.

Because the Kingdom of Palettia held spirits in deep reverence, the Ministry of the Arcane took a heavy hand in controlling access to books and documents that didn't adhere to the national ideology.

"It was Anis who gave it to me in the first place," Tilty added.

"…Lady Anis?" Euphie looked at me.

"I shouldn't say this too loudly, but forbidden books are traded among a select few enthusiasts," I answered. "Most of them aren't interested in the books themselves so much as the rewards for finding them and delivering them to the government."

"Do they have any value other than money?" Euphie asked, conflicted.

Once more, Tilty stepped in to answer with an exaggerated shrug. "Of course, there's no shortage of people who seek them out purely for the knowledge contained within them."

“But why? They’re banned by the state…”

“Because so many of those forbidden books are filled to bursting with knowledge of alchemy and medicine.”

“Alchemy and medicine?” Euphie frowned suspiciously.

Lainie, on the other hand, was wrinkling her nose.

Watching her carefully, Ilia addressed her with a question. “Have you heard about this sort of thing before?”

“Er, ah… Yes… Commoners often pay handsomely for nobles to heal them when they come down with an illness or get badly hurt, but magic isn’t cheap. Those who can’t afford it have to rely on medicine, but that isn’t usually as effective as magic. And if you *do* want to treat a problem with medicine…it’s natural to seek out one of those forbidden books.”

“That makes sense.”

Healing magic was a special privilege of the nobility. Those gifted with the ability to use such magic could set their prices however they liked, often higher than most commoners could afford. There was no end to such demands for exorbitant sums of money, which was one of the underlying causes of the huge gulf between commoners and nobles. Even today, that issue remained unresolved.

“So there’s more or less a black market for this kind of thing,” I said. “I used it myself a few times during my time as an adventurer.”

“What exactly have you been up to…?” Euphie asked.

“I’ve taken on jobs to carry out covert investigations. And given the nature of this kingdom, it isn’t easy finding a way into those black markets.”

In a sense, that was one of the darker sides of the Kingdom of Palettia. If you followed the problem back to its cause, it ultimately originated in the rift between the nobility and the common people, which made it remarkably difficult to address. That being the case, the kingdom and the government had no choice but to tolerate the existence of such illicit marketplaces—at least to some extent.

“Of course, the authorities do take efforts to control most illegal activities, but if we’re going to address this problem at its roots, we’ll need to rethink the way things are done from the ground up… After all, there are a lot of common people in need of healing magic, Euphie.”

“…I see.”

"*We* don't have the power or the authority to fix anything. But even if we can't do anything directly, we can work with my father and urge him to make changes."

As the center of the realm's affairs, the aristocracy was responsible for guiding the kingdom and its policies. Even as a royal princess, I couldn't change the system itself. The only option within my grasp was to understand the situation and to propose what I saw as effective remedies to my father.

It was Tilty who began to lift the oppressive mood that had fallen over us. With a clap of her hands, she caught our attention, her expression making it crystal clear that she wasn't at all interested in the present conversation.

"Let's get back to the matter at hand. We were talking about what to do with Lainie's magicite."

"…Indeed. Does that forbidden book concern vampires?" Euphie asked.

"Yep. It's also the volume that helped Anis and me perfect our ether drug."

"*That* drug?" Euphie asked again, glancing my way for confirmation.

I nodded. "A rudimentary version of it pops up in an old vampire tale. The book is the collected research notes and materials of an old sorcerer later recognized as the very first vampire."

"A sorcerer?"

"Yeah. It's the fruits of his extraordinary genius—or his madness, if you prefer."

Tilty's smile as she stroked the forbidden tome made all of us draw back uncomfortably. *It's certainly the kind of research record that she would adore, but this curse collector truly is something else…*

"The sorcerer's goal was to pursue the hidden truth behind how magic works. He took a different approach than I did, but he ultimately came to a similar conclusion," I said.

"How so?" Euphie asked.

Tilty explained, "Anis's ether drug is made from magicite, and it's designed to help the user absorb the powers of the monsters they once belonged to. As I mentioned earlier, the power of magicite crystals is deeply connected to instinct and survival. You could call the drug a tonic formulated in a way that puts as little strain on the human body as possible."

"So that vampire-sorcerer hit on a similar idea?"

“That’s where our approaches differed—or rather, where our ideas diverged,” I said. “They both involved taking the latent power inside the magicite into one’s body—but the sorcerer chose to become a monster himself.”

Euphie and Lainie both sucked in a breath. Yes, both the sorcerer and I had thought to make use of the power contained within magicite crystals. However, the difference was that he had sought to use it by transforming his own existence.

“It was thought he must have failed, as his research notes end at that point. That’s why we decided on the drug option—but Lainie is living proof the sorcerer’s method might actually have worked.”

“Why would anyone want to turn themselves into a monster…?” Euphie whispered, her voice filled with dread.

There was, of course, an explanation for that, too. “Because what the sorcerer really wanted was preposterous—outrageous, even.”

“…Preposterous…?” Lainie was clearly filled with anxiety, what with the situation being so closely linked to her own case.

I paused, the breath caught in my chest for a moment. I answered quietly, “Immortality.”

For a brief moment, the entire room fell silent. Lainie seemed stunned by the sheer outlandishness of that word, while Euphie seemed to be doubting her own ears.

“The sorcerer didn’t have enough time to pursue his research, to uncover the true nature of magic. So he focused his attention on one particular goal—eternal life—so that he would have all the time in the world to find the other answers,” I said.

“…Impossible. Even if you can use magic to maintain your health, you can’t repair natural decay from age,” Euphie said hoarsely.

Tilty and I had thought as much, but we had also assumed that the sorcerer’s research had ended in failure. No matter how well magic could be used to treat injuries or stabilize someone’s mind, it couldn’t undo the passage of time. It might be possible to slow the aging process, but actual immortality was pure fantasy.

I continued, “Although no one can stop someone from aging, the sorcerer’s obsession and insanity may have given birth to something truly abominable—usurping it from others.”

“…Usurping what…?”

“If you’re old, you can extend your life by stealing the youth of

another. What you lack, you take from others… The sorcerer may well have succeeded. As the end result of his obsession and madness, he became the original vampire."

Lainie wrapped her arms around her body, while Euphie's lips quivered, a solitary bead of sweat running down her cheek.

"…You mean he stole other people's lives to become a monster who can live forever?" Lainie asked.

"It isn't quite true immortality, though, is it?" Euphie followed.

"Vampire tales seem to start taking off after this account was written, although until now, there's never been any actual proof they exist," I replied.

That was why Tilty and I had assumed that the experiment had been only partly successful, that the latter half had ended in failure.

"Immortality is a dangerous thing to try to pull off, but the way the sorcerer chose to pursue it was a problem, too," I added.

"You mean robbing others of their lives?" Euphie asked.

"Yes… In those vampire tales, people who get their blood sucked by a vampire end up becoming vampires, too, right?"

"…It can't be."

"That was what we thought, too… Tilty and I concluded that the stories describe a kind of brainwashing."

"B-brainwashing…?" Lainie murmured. She glanced to Euphie and saw the stern expression on her face, which only unnerved Lainie more.

"As a way of having backups in case something should happen to the original body. By preparing more and more people fixated on the same thoughts and ideas, it becomes an endless obsession to keep working to uncover the truth underlying magic. Maybe the brainwashing instills a perception, an idea of a new *self*. Or maybe it's more like imprinting a certain belief system? Anyway, when vampires try to increase their numbers, what they're really doing, I think, is rewriting the personalities of others to suit themselves."

I fell silent there. Everyone turned their gazes to Lainie. Her face had completely lost its color, and her body was trembling.

"The sorcerer's goal was to get to the underlying truth of magic —to understand its essence," I continued. "So I started thinking… He doesn't necessarily need to discover it himself. He could pass that drive on to others, effectively prolonging his own life and increasing their numbers. And if anything did happen to him, the original researcher, there would still be backup researchers of a

sort."

"…That *is* preposterous," Ilia said tersely.

Actually, I agreed with her on that point.

"Let's get back to the topic of magicite crystals. In my view, this kind of over-the-top magic can only be the result of magicite. This might sound a little extreme, but magicite is essentially just a specialized form of spirit stone capable of activating unique forms of magic. Not only that, we're talking about a type of magicite capable of granting immortality and rewriting a person's mind. If you were to embed something like that into a person, the only thing left is a monster. A near-immortal humanoid monster obsessed with unraveling the mysteries of magic."

Based on the forbidden book that I was holding in my hand, the sorcerer had found a way—though it wasn't at all clear how—to use magicite for such a purpose. I had used the same research to create my ether drug, which probably needed to be kept just as secret.

"…Am I a vampire?" Lainie whispered. She looked sick and about to collapse. Ilia lent her a supporting hand.

"I think there's a high possibility," I answered. "But it's probably more accurate to say that you're *descended* from a vampire rather than that you're a vampire yourself. Vampires are human beings who have been transformed through magicite. It wouldn't be surprising if their descendants inherited that same magicite, too."

"Anyway, you'll outlive us all! You've stumbled on a golden nugget of curses!" Tilty exclaimed.

"This is no time for jokes, Tilty!" I cried back. *I'm trying to answer Lainie's questions here. Don't butt in with ridiculous comments!* "All powers can be either medicinal or venomous, depending on how you use them. And now we know vampires are real. We can't rule out that there might be others besides Lainie. We have to be prepared for the possibility we do encounter one. After all, it could be disastrous if there were others—they could lead the whole kingdom astray."

"Anis is right," Tilty added. "The more control Lainie has over her powers, the more valuable she'll be. Although everyone will no doubt want to keep an eye on her."

With this explanation, Lainie began to calm down.

Indeed. She would be invaluable to us if she mastered her abilities; the kingdom would offer her its full protection, while also keeping an eye on her at all times.

“Well, I’ve said enough,” Tilty announced. “We’ve got Anis with us, and she has experience drawing power from magicite crystals. She’s clearly the best choice to help Lainie from here on out.”

“…Yes. Thank you,” Lainie said, regaining her composure as she bowed her head deeply.

Helping her to manage her abilities would be a win-win for everyone involved.

“In that case, let’s get on with the experiment.”

“Experiment?”

“Your abilities are activated subconsciously, right? Which means you can’t normally control them? In that case, why don’t you try using them on purpose?” Tilty placed a hand on Lainie’s shoulder and gave her a warm smile.

Lainie grimaced as she saw how eager Tilty was to get started. “B-but…I don’t really know how to use magicite…” She glanced back and forth between me and Tilty, at a loss for how to proceed.

Her hesitancy perplexed Tilty. “Just do whatever you do when you normally use magic. You *can* use magic, can’t you?”

“Ugh… I—I’m…not very good at it…”

“In that case, I’ll teach you! Come on! Let’s go!” Tilty beamed, grabbing Lainie by the hand.

“Huh?!” Lainie cried, forced dizzily to her feet.

It looked like I would have to step in. After all, we needed to confirm certain things with Lainie before we could begin.

“Hold on a minute, Tilty. We need her consent first.”

“Her consent?”

“If we activate the magicite inside her, there’s a chance it could unleash all sorts of magic, right? And what if something changes inside her when we activate it? We need to make sure Euphie and Ilia are at a safe distance.”

To others, Lainie’s existence was unprecedented. There was no telling what might happen if the magicite inside her was activated. We certainly couldn’t discard the possibility that it could turn her completely into a monster, mind and all. I wanted us to be cautious.

Tilty narrowed her eyes. “I get what you’re saying, but we can’t just keep putting it off, you know? What other choice do we have?”

“That’s…true, I suppose. But she needs to be ready first…”

To my surprise, it was Lainie who stopped me. “…No, I’m all right, Lady Anis. I…I’ll do it.” She still looked a little frightened, but there was no mistaking the resolve in her eyes. “…Lady Tilty is

right. If I can't control it, I'll be killed, won't I? So this is my only real choice. I have to try. Don't worry. I might cause you all more trouble if something goes wrong, but…"

"…That's why I'm here," I said. "I'll make sure it everything is fine. All right?"

"Yes." Lainie nodded.

I shut my mouth. If she was set on going ahead, it wasn't my place to try to dissuade her.

Now that she had received Lainie's permission, Tilty moved behind her and placed her hands on her shoulders. She glanced my way for the go-ahead to proceed.

I nodded. "Euphie, Ilia. Stay back, just in case."

"Yes."

"Understood."

I needed them to be safe if Lainie's abilities went out of control. Once they had put a good distance between themselves and Lainie, Tilty began her instruction.

"Ready? To use magic only requires you to *feel* the power inside your body and get used to manipulating it. There's a fixed amount of magical energy inside your body. Any excess power is expelled as you breathe or when you relieve yourself. Anis, you said the magicite was near her heart?"

"Yes. When I examined her, I sensed a foreign object in her chest."

After listening to my response, Tilty stroked Lainie's back with curiosity. Lainie's face tensed at that touch, and she quivered.

"I see. It certainly does feel like magicite. I can sense a pathway for transmitting magical energy, but it seems the magicite itself hasn't been fully activated yet. Perhaps it contains only enough power to be used unconsciously but remains dormant as it hasn't been consciously activated?"

"H-how can you tell?" Lainie stammered.

"I can sense the flow of your magical energy with my hands. This is necessary to manage my own condition, and Anis has examined me the same way so many times that it's second nature now."

In this world, everyone possessed magical energy—though, of course, in different amounts depending on the individual. If you could understand the flow of power within your own body, you could apply that knowledge to sense someone else's internal

magical energy, too. That was how I had detected the magicite within Lainie in the first place.

"First, take a deep breath. Focus on your abdomen as you inhale. If you concentrate, you should be able to feel the magical energy building up in your stomach."

Lainie closed her eyes, breathing in and out as Tilty instructed.

"Once you can sense the energy building up in your stomach, breathe out," Tilty instructed. "The magical energy will leave your body along with your breath. Remember that feeling. Now let it flow through your body. From your stomach to your chest, your chest to your arms. Then from your arms to your legs, and back to your stomach."

Lainie exhaled slowly. Then she took another deep breath.

Tilty, watching her repeat this process several times over, kept a hand on Lainie's shoulder. "That's it. You can feel the flow of your magical energy, can't you? This time, let it concentrate in your chest. Can you feel it melting away into your heart?"

"…Yes. There's definitely something in there… It's like the energy is being blocked."

"Good, that's what we expected. Don't rush. Pour more power into it slowly, little by little, and try to make it unravel."

At Tilty's urging, Lainie began to manipulate her magical energy as her breathing maintained a fixed, constant rhythm, her eyes shut as she concentrated her attention.

The room was so quiet that I could hear her breathing from some distance away.

Lainie remained that way for a short while. Even I felt something, like a jolt of static electricity. At that moment, Lainie's presence underwent a sudden change, as though something had finally taken shape.

It was as if a whirlpool had concentrated around her, before finally settling.

She let out a deep breath before opening her eyes. I couldn't help but startle at what I saw.

"Lainie, your eyes…"

"My eyes…?"

She glanced my way, her gaze feverish. Her irises were no longer their usual gray but rather a vivid crimson—and in their depths, a mysterious light glimmered.

"Huh…? What's this? Eek! My teeth…"

“Teeth?”

Stunned, she opened her mouth slightly. Her once neat row of teeth now had two sharp canines. She was becoming more vampire-like by the second.

I rushed toward her. “Lainie, release your magic. Let it go, slowly.”

“I’ll direct you, Lainie,” Tilty added. “Follow my guidance.”

“Yes…” Lainie closed her eyes. She exhaled slowly.

I took her hands in my own, while Tilty’s hands were on her shoulders from behind. I don’t know how long we remained that way, but I waited until I was sure that she had her magical energy back under control. Finally, she opened her eyes once more.

The mysterious glint that had shone so brightly a moment earlier had vanished, though her eyes remained a deep crimson.

“The color is still there… Is there any change in your vision?” I asked.

“No, not really. But my eyes do feel strange…”

“Strange in what way?”

“W-well… It’s like my magical energy is flowing through them more easily now…”

“…Mystic eyes, maybe? If you wanted to charm someone, that would be the most effective way to do it…,” I wondered out loud.

There were monsters out there known for channeling their energy through their eyes to cast magic. Such techniques were often described as “mystic eyes”—or in some sources, as “evil eyes.” I assumed Lainie’s activation of her magicite must have triggered this change.

“My teeth and nails are back to normal. I think I might be able to extend them again by channeling my energy through them, though,” she observed.

“Hmm… So it triggers physical changes,” Tilty remarked. “It’s an interesting power; that’s for sure. I can’t think of any other magic that has an effect like that. There are techniques to cover one’s body in magic but not to change the body itself.” She clearly found this all deeply engrossing, but she was taking care not to stand directly in front of Lainie, wary of her mystic eyes.

“What about your charm ability, Lainie? Do you think you can control it?”

“Yes, a little… My mind used to feel hazy—it was nearly suffocating—but everything seems so clear now. I think I can use

my powers, too. I don't need to stop the flow, just minimize it. And then…"

"I knew it," Tilty remarked. She sighed in satisfaction.

"Knew what?" I asked, tilting my head to one side. *What is she talking about?*

Having realized that I was still in the dark, Tilty flashed me a proud grin. "Lainie's charm ability is the result of magical energy leaking out from her. I surmised that once we managed to bring it under control, we could stop it from affecting those around her. After all, the magicite is a natural part of her body, so I theorized it might be unhealthy to keep it in an inactivated state."

"…I see."

That made sense. If we considered that the magicite inside a monster functioned as part of its body, practically as an internal organ, it stood to reason that it was a vital part.

Now, Lainie's powers had been brought to heel possibly for the first time ever, thanks to our helping her to bring her innate magic under control. Not only that, but she had said that she had been suffering beforehand, so Tilty's hypothesis certainly had merit.

"Euphie, Ilia. It looks like we're all right here, so you can come back now."

"Coming."

As soon as I gave the two of them permission to return, they both quickly approached.

Euphie stood by my side while Ilia approached Lainie, peering into her face. "Miss Lainie, are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine… Um, do I…do I look strange now?" Lainie asked. She seemed brighter than before. Her mood had definitely improved now that her charm ability had been brought to heel.

However, Ilia seemed less satisfied as she examined Lainie's eyes. "…No, there's nothing particularly strange. It *is* startling how your eyes have changed color like that, but that's about it, I suppose?"

"Huh…?" Lainie hadn't expected that at all. She remained frozen in place.

Tilty moved in front of her, stared into her eyes, and nodded. "It's all right. I don't think there's anything happening inside you right now… Maybe that charm ability is more akin to imprinting thoughts on those around you rather than directly manipulating their emotions."

“Imprinting…?”

“Have you heard how freshly hatched chicks often take the first thing they see as their parent? Maybe when you make eye contact with people, you imprint a perception on them like that, a compulsion to protect you. Maybe that’s how your charm ability works?”

“Imprinting a pattern of thought… That could well be it,” I mused. “Now that you’re in control of your magicite crystal, you can probably adjust the thought patterns you imprint on others, too.”

The color of Lainie’s eyes had changed, which made sense if they had also gained the ability to imprint thoughts on others. It reminded me of how two people might fall in love when they make eye contact—a transfer of thought and emotion.

“But if that’s the case, shouldn’t those affected want to keep protecting her? Why are some of the students starting to have negative thoughts about her?” Ilia asked.

Tilty was more than happy to discuss her next hypothesis. “Imprinted thoughts are just that—they don’t affect a person’s emotions in and of themselves. It mustn’t be uncommon for someone’s thoughts and emotions to be out of sync, and the greater that inconsistency, the more warped they become. That, in turn, causes great stress at a subconscious level, which is probably only resolved by developing negative feelings toward the person at their center.”

To me, Lainie’s charm ability seemed more complicated than that, but if that was the general gist of the process, it did explain the distorted relationships that people had with her.

At that moment, Euphie cleared her throat. “…As nice as this lively discussion is, Lainie looks tired, so we don’t we take a break?”

Lainie herself stepped back apologetically. She *did* still look anxious, so Euphie probably had a point there.

“Good idea. Let’s take a breather and have my maid prepare some tea,” Tilty said.

* * *

…*Lady Anis and Tilty really are incredible*, I thought as we took a

break at my suggestion.

The fact that they detected the magicite within Lainie, learned its powers, and presented a solution… No matter how hard I tried, all that would have been beyond my capabilities.

"…Hm? Euphie? What's wrong?" Lady Anis asked, peering into my face with concern.

"No, it's nothing," I answered, letting out a sigh.

"Oh…?"

I couldn't help but feel as though Lady Anis was trying to shield me from any discussion of my failed engagement. I had been kept at a distance when she had sat in on Lainie's audience with His Majesty, so I felt somewhat alienated.

I'd spent a lot of time thinking after Prince Algard had called off our betrothal, but in the end, I could conclude only that this outcome was the result of inadequate effort on my part. I didn't have it in me to blame anyone else for my own mistakes.

I was supposed to live up to the expectations of my position, yet even discounting Lainie and her unexpected abilities, my relationship with Prince Algard had never been a good one.

What happened wasn't entirely due to her charm ability. There were things that I could still have done, things that I could have said—and I had failed at every turn. The least I could do now was own up to my mistakes.

So what should I do about it all? I was supposed to be Lady Anis's assistant, yet it seemed that Tilty was much better at that role than I was.

…Not that there's anything wrong with her, but still…

For some reason, it stung to watch Lady Anis and Tilty so engrossed in their discussion.

I found myself lifting my hand to my chest, trying to quell my feelings even a little, but I just couldn't clear my mind.

"Hey, Euphyllia?" came a sudden voice from up close.

"…?! Wh-what?"

It was Tilty, staring into my face. "Hmm…?"

"Um…?"

"Come with me for a minute. I need to take the forbidden book back to my library."

"Eh?"

"Anis, you don't mind if I borrow Euphyllia for a little bit, right?"

“Huh?” I was taken aback by both Tilty’s sudden declaration and the way she was calling across the room.

Lady Anis frowned deeply, as though wondering what on earth she was up to. “Right now? Why?”

“Come on, what’s the matter? I just want to talk to her. We’ll take the forbidden tome back to the library, and then we’ll be right back.”

“…You’re not exactly the most trustworthy type, you know…”

“Are you saying you won’t allow it?”

“That depends… Euphie?” Lady Anis turned to me with a troubled look.

To be honest, I was so startled that I didn’t know how to answer.

“It’s fine, isn’t it? Come on,” Tilty urged. “I like to talk to people every now and then, you know?”

“…This is smelling fishier by the minute,” Lady Anis remarked.

“What? So I can’t even talk to her one-on-one without her guardian present?” Tilty complained.

“Hmm…” Lady Anis was clearly at a loss for an answer. As was I.

“…Don’t worry, Lady Anis,” I said. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

“Euphie…”

“She won’t bite, I’m sure. Shall we go?” Having accepted Tilty’s invitation, I left the room alongside her.

Tilty remained silent as we made our way down the corridor. All I could do was follow behind her until we’d reached what must have been the library.

“So we’re clear, this is just between us,” Tilty said.

“Are there any other forbidden books?”

“Oh yes. Take a look.”

“…Excuse me,” I said as I stepped inside.

As I stepped into the library, I was struck by the scent of countless old documents and tomes. I had always loved reading, so I was quite familiar with this smell. Tilty entered behind me and locked the door.

The room was doused in darkness, but Tilty soon murmured something under her breath, and a dim light flickered to life. It was the same kind of magical lamp used in the detached palace. Truly remarkable.

“The books are all lined up on the shelves in order,” Tilty said.

The room wasn't particularly large, but it was filled to the brim with a great many tomes. I glanced around, my interest piqued.

In the meantime, Tilty placed the forbidden book that she had brought with her back on one of the shelves.

"Now then, where were we? Was there something you wanted to say to me, Euphyllia?"

"Huh?"

"Maybe I was just imagining things, but you were looking at me strangely a minute ago, no?"

"…You noticed?"

If Tilty had realized it, then Lady Anis must have, too…

I raised my hand to my cheek, and Tilty suddenly broke into laughter.

"It's fine. Probably only Ilia and I noticed it. Anis is sensitive to negative thoughts, but she's a little dull when it comes to the emotions of those who like her."

"…Ah."

"Are you jealous?"

Jealous. I found myself frowning at that word. Was that why it was so hard for me to breathe? Had jealousy taken root in my heart?

"Ah, so you weren't even aware of it yourself…? Well, she *is* an adorable young lady."

"…Did I look jealous?"

"I can't imagine what else it would be. Unlike Anis, I know how to properly judge people's feelings, especially when they're directed at me." Tilty let out an exaggerated sigh.

Come to think about it, *something* had been on my mind since the moment I had first met this young lady, so unlike what one might expect of a marquis's daughter. She and Lady Anis had known each other for a long time, and they certainly seemed to understand each other on a certain level.

I was convinced that she had something that I lacked, that she was closer to Lady Anis than I was—and, I now realized, I was envious of her for it. At the same time, the realization that I harbored such a heavy feeling made me ill at ease.

"Ah, seriously? I didn't expect you to be this pure and innocent… I was just teasing you."

"…I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize. You'll make me feel bad," Tilty said, clicking

her tongue as she played with her hair.

I shrugged in apology, blaming myself for having upset her.

"…Well, Euphyllia? I do have one question for you."

"What?"

"How serious are you?"

I didn't understand the meaning of her question. "Um, about what?"

"I'm asking if you're serious about being Anis's assistant."

That question sent ice through my heart. For a moment, I couldn't even breathe properly, before a weak sound escaped my throat.

I wanted to know why she would ask me such a thing, but I couldn't find my voice. The words wouldn't come to me, yet I could easily picture Lady Anis and Tilty conversing with one another so eagerly…

"Don't look at me like that… Ah, that does it. I don't know how to put this delicately, but you're a bit of a pain to deal with, you know that? As far as I'm concerned, if you're fine being an assistant, you might as well stick with it. And I can understand why Anis would want to keep you on."

"Huh?"

"Not that I particularly care, mind, but you joined her because Prince Algard broke off your engagement, right? However, the commotion and the damage to your reputation have already been partly undone after that mess with the dragon, no? So what's the point of staying on as her assistant?"

"…Why are you asking me that?" I found myself squinting back at her. What on earth was she trying to say?

"I mean, if you're planning on fulfilling your duties as the daughter to a ducal house, you won't be able to stay with her forever, right?"

"…Th-that's…"

"Anis took you on as her assistant so you could redeem yourself. You've achieved that goal already, and we've solved the mystery of the incident with Lainie, which triggered all that trouble in the first place. Now that we know the cause, we shouldn't have too much difficulty bringing everyone who was under her spell out of it. That means there's no real need for you to stay on as her assistant anymore. Maybe you think you haven't done enough to clear your name yet, but it's only a matter of time before you do."

"…Even so…why are you asking me all this?"

"…I think if you don't stop with these half measures, you'll definitely regret it," Tilty said plainly.

My whole body felt like it was being constricted. I couldn't move a finger.

Tilty snorted at me. "I'm not telling you this for your sake. I'm saying it for hers."

"Lady Anis's…?"

"As far as I can see, she seems to like you… So if you're not going to put your whole heart into this, you should turn around now," Tilty said, waving her hands in the air.

I was speechless, and I could hardly move.

Was I being half-hearted about this…? Was that…was that the feeling of powerlessness that had fallen over me? It wasn't like I could debate with Lady Anis the way that Tilty could.

"Hey, come on now, don't start crying on me… If you're serious about being her assistant, I'll let it go. But are *you* fine with that? That's all I wanted to know."

"Am I…fine with it…?"

"You should have realized this just from hanging around her, but Anis is a real-life heretic—down to her bones. That's fine for now, what with His Majesty looking out for her, but will there be a place for her here when Prince Algard takes over the kingdom?"

Tilty's words struck hard, and she didn't let up.

"Prince Algard hates her. He might not let her stay in the detached palace like she is now. Even if she were to become a direct vassal of his, he would probably want to keep her somewhere remote, away from the capital. Would *you* go along with that?"

Given her relationship with her brother, it was true that if His Majesty were to abdicate and Prince Algard became king, Lady Anis could well lose her position in the royal capital…

She might be ordered to leave the palace, to relocate to some far-off area. Yes, that was easily within the realm of possibility. Would I stick with her through all that? I couldn't possibly come up with an answer on the spot.

…What do I want to do…?

If I could wish for anything, it would be simply to continue walking the path that I was treading now alongside Lady Anis. I wanted to support her, to always have her back. But would it be *right* for me to have that wish come true…?

“This will probably sound harsh…but I think there are other paths open to you beyond just being Anis’s assistant. If you marry a nobleman, you could secure her a new ally, someone who could support her once Prince Algard takes the throne, no?”

“…That…makes sense.”

“Ah, that does it. This is going to sound like I’m giving life advice now, but here goes. I believe you have the privilege to do whatever you want… I myself have an inseparable, fatal bond with her. I just don’t want to see one of my few long-standing friends get hurt. So it will be a problem if you’re only half serious. You’re important to her. And if something was to happen to you, she would make another scene, you realize?” Tilty said with another snort.

My guilt led my eyes to the floor. “You’re a good friend, Tilty.”

“We’re not particularly close. We just don’t hold back around each other.”

“But…”

“There are no *buts*. I mean, there are certain things she and I will never see eye to eye on.”

“…What do you mean?”

Did the two of them have disagreements? I looked back at her in wonder, but what I saw shocked me. Her expression was plain, straightforward—and stripped of all emotion. In the weak lamplight, that emotionless mask startled me so badly that I yelped just a little.

“I mean, I *hate* magic,” Tilty said.

“…You do?”

“And I hate the nobility, what with how it promotes that cursed power like it’s so wonderful, never mind how it’s tormented me ever since I was a kid. It all but ruined my life. As far as I’m concerned, magic should be abolished. So whenever I see just how much she adores it, I feel like throwing up,” Tilty said with a weak smile.

I could tell from her tone of voice that she was being completely serious.

“I think it’s amusing, the way she pursues her magicology and makes those magical tools of hers. So I’m willing to lend her a hand when she needs it. At the end of the day, though, it’s the polar opposite of what I really want. My dream is for commoners to get their hands on magic, too, through those magical tools. That would

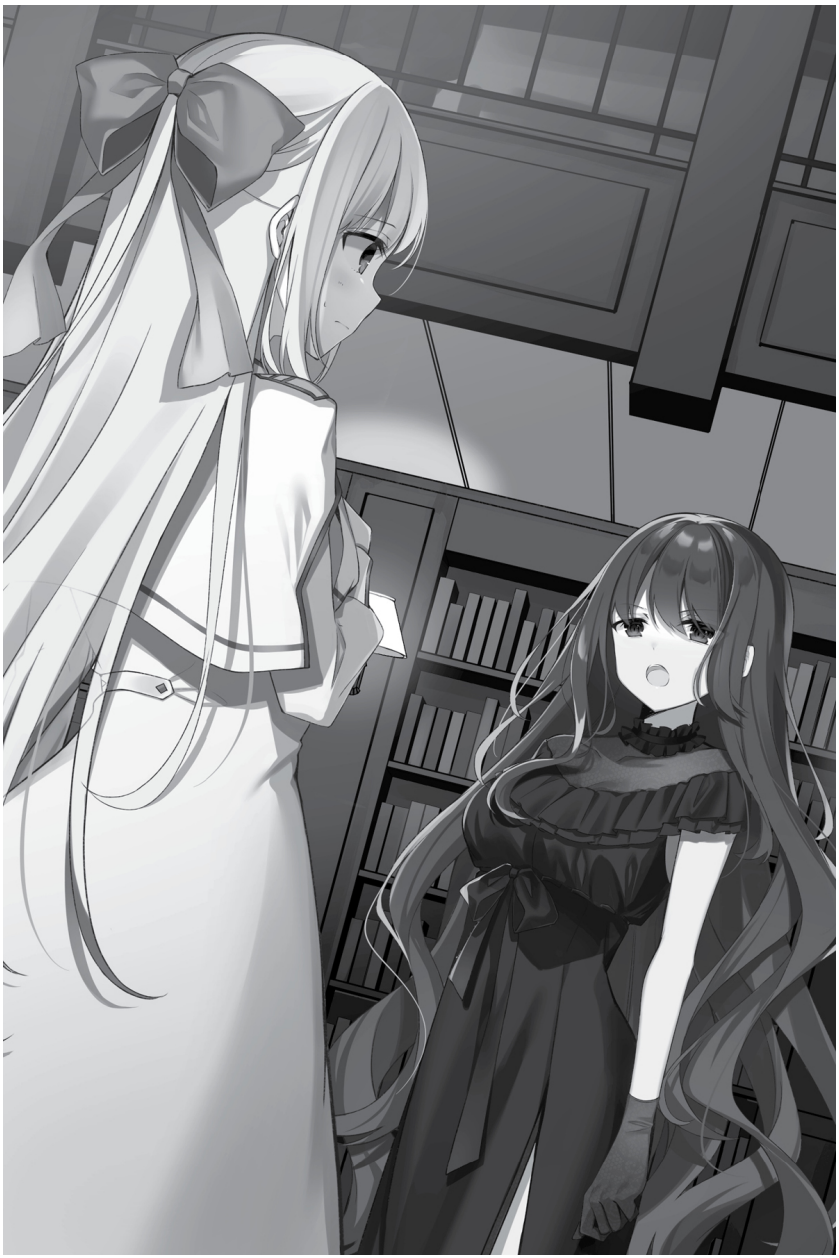
destroy the current system of magic. Anis pursues the arcane with all her heart. You must have seen how her eyes glitter, just how deeply she believes in it? Even though she was never blessed with it herself. It's crazy, don't you think?" Tilty's tone was spiteful but, at the same time, imbued with a hint of contradictory gentleness. That inconsistency surprised me.

I'm sure it was true that she hated magic—resented it, truly. She surely hated Lady Anis for her love of it as well. Nonetheless, she continued to regard her as a friend and was willing to help Lady Anis accomplish her dreams even when they were at odds with her own.

"If seeing her hang around me is enough to make you worry, you had better get your own thoughts in order," Tilty said. "Think carefully about what you want. I'll even lend you a hand, because I find the whole situation rather amusing—but I won't go along with Anis's dreams. If you want to support her, that's fine—but I hope you realize it won't be an easy road."

I had no response to her besides a weak nod.

After all, something told me that when I did come to an answer, it would require that I make a momentous decision.



* * *

I had just finished getting ready for bed after returning to the detached palace from the Claret villa and was mulling over my thoughts when Lady Anis called on me in my room. She appeared troubled.

"…Euphie, did Tilty say something? She wasn't rude, was she?"

My heart panged to think that I had made her worry, but I nonetheless responded with a smile. "I'm fine."

"…But you look kind of down, you know?"

My worry must have been written large on my face, as Lady Anis broke into a frown when I raised a hand bashfully to my cheek. Perceptive as she was, I doubted that I would be able to hide my feelings from her. With a sigh of resignation, I affirmed my resolve before simply saying, "…I'm just thinking about the future."

"You mean about what to do next?"

"Well, now that we know about Lainie, we've gotten to the heart of the uproar."

"Ah, right."

"Yes. It will take some time, but things should eventually cool down…so I was wondering what to do afterward."

"…Oh, all right." That softened the worry in her expression. I couldn't be completely certain, but I got the impression that Tilty had been trying to urge me to think about my own future.

"…I'm always taking half measures. I hate it," I said.

"Half measures? Like what?" Lady Anis murmured, tilting her head to one side.

I sat down on the edge of my bed, patting the bedding to urge her to join me. Sensing that I wanted to talk more deeply, she sat next to me.

She had finished getting ready for bed, so her normally tied-back hair was now hanging loose.

I let my gaze wander from her to the back of the room before I began to quietly voice my thoughts. "Looking back, I realize now that I wasn't good enough to be Prince Algard's fiancée. You've helped me to restore my honor, Lady Anis…but it will all be

meaningless if I don't change how I go about things."

"…Right."

"I'm in your debt, Lady Anis. I want to help you. I can't take my eyes off you. Your magicology research is wonderful, and I'm convinced that the magical tools you've been inventing will improve people's lives. That's why I want to help…but to be honest, I don't know what I can do right now."

I couldn't look at her. I stared at my own palms just to see her immediately wrap her hand around mine.

"…I'm sorry. I didn't realize how strongly you felt about it all."

"I know you care about me, Lady Anis. You gave me the freedom not to have to push myself too hard."

"…Yep. You were working so hard at the job you were given, weren't you? That's why I wanted to give you more free time, more time for yourself…"

"Yes. I haven't been staying here long, but everything has been so fresh and fun. I like it here. I feel like I really belong… No matter how many times I thank you, words will never be enough to express my gratitude."

Lady Anis squeezed my hand. I tightened my grip, too.

"My first thought was that I wanted to stay here, like this," I said. "But I can't. I'm still the daughter of a duke. I have a duty to fulfill to the House of Magenta."

"…Right."

"If I can, I'd like to fulfill that responsibility by your side while I'm helping you. I've been consumed by thoughts of what I can do, what I *ought* to do… I may be your assistant, but Tilty is more knowledgeable than I am. I don't think I'm of much real use to you."

"Don't say that! I'm the one at fault! I was so worried about you…!" Lady Anis stammered, drawing close to me with an apologetic frown.

I placed a finger between her eyes, keeping her from coming too close. "Yes, I know. Then I thought I ought to do more myself, be more proactive. I shouldn't feel embarrassed to be by your side."

To be honest, I still couldn't quite envision my future. Yes, I had a duty as the daughter of a noble house, but I had no intention of returning home—at least now. Reentering those social circles would be another thing entirely.

No, with all the uncertainties that still abounded, I couldn't

envision it at all. That was no doubt partly because I had caught a glimpse now of the world that Lady Anis was trying to create. I had realized that I was only standing at the very cusp. So much still lay ahead.

"…Why do you like magic so much?" I asked.

At this question, still holding my hand, Lady Anis turned her gaze to the ceiling. "Hmm. I guess I just do. It's that simple—I adore it. I bet falling in love feels similar."

"Even though you can't use magic yourself?"

"Yeah, it's…a shame. But I don't hate myself for that. There are other things that I can see, that I can create, only because I am who I am. I can't just give those things to someone else."

The smile on Lady Anis's face was dazzling. Her eyes were sparkling and absent of self-doubt.

I found myself inexplicably drawn to her profile. She was staring into the distance. I thought she might fly off at a moment's notice.

"…I want to love it, too," I finally said.

Tilty despised her own magical talent. She had even called it a curse. Because of that, she couldn't quite see eye to eye with Lady Anis. For her, magic was an abomination. So what did magic mean to me? I still hadn't found that answer.

"Lady Anis," I called out, holding her hand in mine.

Was I allowed to want this? To stay here, with her, selfish though it was? I wanted to be with her, so I wanted to love magic, too.

Was that something that I ought to wish for? Because I did wish for it—to stay by her side, stand with her as she made her dreams come true… Because I wanted to be the one to stand with her. That was all.

Was the reason that I possessed such magical talent, the meaning behind who I was—was it all so that I could be with her? I bottled up these unspoken thoughts in my heart as I rested my head on her shoulder.

"…Can we stay like this tonight, Euphie? Can I sleep by your side?" Lady Anis asked kindly, indulging my affections.

I nodded my head, but in my heart, I whispered, *I'm sorry. I'm not strong enough to stand by myself yet. Forgive me. Please wait a little longer, Lady Anis. I'll catch up with you, I promise. I want to love the magic you so cherish. I want to use my magic to fulfill your dreams.*

I knew that it was but a small wish, but that was my goal now.

CHAPTER 2

After conducting her physical examination of Lainie at her own villa, Tilty soon became a frequent visitor at the detached palace—her primary purpose being the further monitoring of Lainie's physical status.

Ilia was away on business at the royal palace, so the four of us —Euphie, Lainie, Tilty, and I—were sitting together in the salon. Tilty had a rather suspicious appearance since she was in the habit of concealing her face with a black veil whenever she left her own home. Did she hate direct sunlight that much?

"So, Lainie, have you felt any urge to start drinking blood?" Tilty asked. The first thing she wanted to know about was those vampiric impulses.

"Yes…," Lainie murmured.

Ever since the magicite inside her had been activated, Lainie had experienced several such urges to consume blood. She must have felt ashamed of these impulses that had come over her, as she was holding herself back lately, trying to make herself seem small.

"It seems that the magical energy that your body normally produces is being consumed by the magicite crystal, and the need to supplement that lost power manifests in an urge to suck blood from others and receive their energy."

By consuming the blood of others, vampires were able to absorb extra magical energy to supplement their own. In general, it wasn't easy to transfer magical energy between people, and the effect was hardly worthwhile unless both individuals were particularly compatible. Through their embedded magicite, vampires had to be skilled in manipulating others' magical power.

Moreover, since absorbing someone else's magical energy triggered symptoms remarkably similar to drunkenness, it wasn't possible to consume blood in large amounts all at once.

"Hmm? So they're offering you blood to drink? I suppose just getting bitten by a vampire isn't enough to turn someone else into one?" Tilty asked.

"Yes, not unless I try to turn them… And it was Miss Ilia's blood, after all…"

“Euphie and I offered our own, but Ilia wouldn’t have any of that on account of our statuses, so she volunteered,” I explained.

Although Lainie did have a little taste of my and Euphie’s blood to compare the effects, Ilia had insisted that she wouldn’t allow us to keep doing it all the time, and so she was giving her own instead whenever Lainie found herself overcome by that irresistible urge.

“That said, it is rather strange how activating your magicite seems to have given you a natural understanding of how to replenish your energy,” Tilty observed.

“Yes, it has. Maybe it’s because of the magicite, but my senses are different now from other people’s. It’s a little difficult, actually…,” Lainie replied.

“But that’s another unique characteristic of vampires, isn’t it?” Tilty said. “I think we can assume our theory—that magicite crystals store records of experiences—is a valid one.”

“We could probably say vampires are those who have inherited a special system of magic through unique magicite crystals,” I said in agreement.

Apparently, Lainie had always excelled at water-type magic. Even now, her water affinity was rather high, and some of the techniques that she was capable of drawing on were difficult even for Euphie to employ.

According to Tilty, Lainie’s skills weren’t ordinary magic; rather, the magicite crystal inside her body channeled those powers.

She had a theory: A vampire’s magicite served as a kind of storage device, and by passing on those crystals, they were able to impart their accumulated knowledge to future generations in pursuit of the ultimate truth.

If the next possessor didn’t realize that they had such a magicite crystal, it would then go to their own descendants, until at last someone was fortunate enough to awaken it and, through doing so, be possessed by the drive to pursue the greatest of truths. Even Lainie had begun to feel that compulsion.

“I’m glad things seem to be stabilizing. And not just Lainie’s condition—everything with Anis, too,” Tilty said.

“In a way, it’s been wonderful having Lainie come here. She’s been helping out a lot,” I replied.

Lainie was getting used to life in the detached palace. She was even studying alongside Euphie. She might not have been the fastest learner, but she was dedicated. Even without her latent

charm abilities, the sight of her desperately trying to remember the contents of her many lessons was enough to bring a smile to my face.

…It looks like I'm teaching her now, too. How did that happen…? Well, at least Euphie seems to be enjoying herself…

With everything surrounding Lainie recently, it pained me to admit that I hadn't given Euphie the attention that I ought to have. She was my assistant, after all. It was probably fair to say that she was looking out for my health and well-being, but I was sure she felt as though she wasn't making much of a contribution to our present project.

Still, it was a relief to see that she enjoyed studying with me and Lainie. I couldn't deny that there was still so much that I needed to learn as a member of the royal family. That said, all those etiquette lessons were quite a chore.

Our studies of vampire nature and how they controlled their powers were proceeding little by little, too, and I was almost certain that Lainie's charm ability wouldn't pose a problem so long as she remained in an unthreatening environment.

I had sent our preliminary research results to my father and mother, who should have passed them on by now to everyone else who was familiar with the situation. So far, there had been no problems.

Everything is so peaceful…

If possible, I wished that life could just keep on going as it was now, free from unexpected hiccups. After all, everything had been so hectic lately—first Allie breaking off his betrothal, then the dragon attack, and then finding proof of the existence of vampires.

I wanted nothing more than for these peaceful days to continue. And as I whispered that prayer inside my heart, Ilia returned from her outing.

The moment I saw her face, an ominous premonition struck me. At first glance, she looked as expressionless as ever—but I could feel the grim air around her.

"I've returned…Your Highness."

"Welcome back, Ilia… What's wrong? Did something happen?"

"…Yes, I'm afraid." She let out a deep sigh, before glancing up at the ceiling.

Something serious must have happened. What were the odds right after I had made a mental prayer for peace?

“What is it?”

“You’ve received an invitation…from the Ministry of the Arcane.”

The Ministry of the Arcane. They must have sent the envelope that she was clutching in her hand.

At this news, my brow furrowed. “Why would they…?”

“Is something wrong?” Lainie wondered quietly.

Of course, she didn’t know about my relationship with the ministry.

I wanted to answer her, but first I had to check precisely what this invitation was. Once I had opened the seal, I removed the sheet of paper from the envelope.

“…Ugh, this is going to be a pain…,” I muttered under my breath.

Lainie shrank back—but this was no time to give over to fear. This letter could soon develop into a major hassle.

“Lady Anis? What does it say?” Euphie asked.

“…They want me to hold a lecture on the dragon materials we collected. Basically, they want me to explain what everything is and what we’re planning to do with it.”

The letter was written in the obtuse style favored by many a nobleman, interspersed with the usual hefty dose of sarcasm and the occasional barb. But the request was as I said—they wanted me to inform them of how I intended to use the materials that had been retrieved from the dragon that I had defeated.

Euphie took the letter from my hands and read it over. She raised an eyebrow in a frown, her expression darkening as she reached the end. “…What on earth…? Lady Anis?”

“Hmm. They’re probably trying to find fault with my plans and make it as hard as possible for me to retrieve the materials! They’ve done this before, though it wasn’t a dragon that time!”

I had collected the materials that I used in my research at my own expense, so there shouldn’t have been anything for the Ministry of the Arcane to complain about. But they did love giving me a hard time.

This was a witch hunt, their way of protesting the development of my magical tools. They might not have been able to do anything about me personally, but they often tried to unjustly hold back my research. In some cases, they even stole my projects mid-development.

“What?! Do they want to treat your inventions like those forbidden books?” Lainie asked in alarm. Her eyes shot wide open.

“Apparently. Sure, some of the items I’ve made are a little at odds with people’s faith, and some of them might have had a bit of an effect on the outside world. I’m fine with them being judged, so long as my accusers judge everything fairly. But they just want to pull the carpet out from under me here!”

“I sympathize… I’ve been there myself,” Tilty murmured in agreement.

One of her new drugs had been the subject of a similar inquiry. But unlike me, she had gotten into trouble with the ministry only that one time and no longer publicly disclosed any new medicinal formulations.

Whenever I completed a new invention, I would take it first to my father. Only then, after hearing what he thought, would I decide whether or not to present it to the ministry. Normally, they wouldn’t put up too much of a fuss if I had already received my father’s permission, but there were occasions when they tried to strike first.

Because of that, I had decided to procure any necessary materials myself, and since embarking as an adventurer, I hadn’t had any trouble hunting down monsters to acquire whatever I needed on my own. Unfortunately, as a result, I was receiving a lot of attention. Rumors about me were on the rise. Consequently, the Ministry of the Arcane was singling me out.

“Is the ministry even allowed to do that?” Lainie asked.

“Well, their actions aren’t illegal, per se.”

“But why?!”

“Assuming that I haven’t decided how to use my materials, they could say they need them for one purpose or another and force me to sell. And it would be a legitimate transaction,” I explained.

“They could *force* you to sell?” Lainie tilted her head to one side in bewilderment. She had no idea how the conversation had reached this point.

I breathed a tired sigh before I went into the details. “The Ministry of the Arcane is well funded and staffed by elites. They’ve got both a huge organizational budget and a mountain of private assets. If I go to them without a plan of how exactly to use each and every item, they’ll force me to sell them. If I refuse, they’ll go behind my back, calling me greedy, saying I’m conducting all sorts

of shady experiments, and so on."

"…Isn't the director Moritz's father?"

"That's right."

"…Is he allowed to do something so awful?"

"It's not exactly forbidden, and the ministry has enough power and authority to get away with it."

As far as I was concerned, the Ministry of the Arcane really was a collection of detestable meddlers. I was just trying to do my research in private! However, I had to admit that my work didn't exactly fit with the ministry's ideology, principles, or philosophy.

"But it isn't *everyone* at the ministry. There are some researchers there who *do* recognize my kind of magic and my achievements. But this is politics, and even those who might otherwise support me have to look out for their own position."

The Ministry of the Arcane was a consultative body for matters of national importance. Its members viewed themselves as the kingdom's elite and took pride in being the driving force behind the realm's culture, not to mention its overall stability. That was why they were so often in conflict with me.

From their point of view, they probably thought that they were making concessions. If I kept quiet, having not yet decided how to use the materials, they were put in a difficult position. If I came out with what they regarded as a poorly conceived idea, they would kick up an incredible fuss.

"I did think Moritz a little prideful, but even so…," Lainie began.

"It isn't only Count Chartreuse and his son. The people at the ministry are just terrible. And there's such a huge gulf separating them from the common people. Whether or not you can use magic is a huge deal in this country. You've realized that by now, haven't you, Lainie?"

Lainie pursed her lips. She had been a commoner herself before being elevated to the nobility. It was thanks to her magical potential that she had attended the academy. She had seen firsthand just how wide that gulf was.

And then there was me—a royal princess unable to wield magic. In a sense, my existence was even more of a hindrance to the ministry's worldview than the common people's.

"This timing is the worst, huh?" Tilty remarked. "I guess those dragon materials are just too conspicuous? Or maybe they're just

looking for an excuse."

"Ahhhhh! Stop it, just stop it! It couldn't possibly be worse! And I can't even turn them down!"

Why did they have to pick now of all possible times to do this? If I declined the ministry's request, they would definitely start spreading fresh rumors.

Up until now, I hadn't cared one iota about my own reputation —but now there was Euphie's honor to think about, and I was responsible for Lainie, too. If I provoked the ministry too much, there was a good chance that the two of them could end up getting caught in the cross fire.

Even if I could fix any harm done to Euphie's reputation at a later date, it would still be bad if people started talking about Lainie. After all, Count Chartreuse would have known that I had pulled her aside for questioning.

I was acutely concerned that people might start wondering why they hadn't seen her lately. I worried that they might wonder whether they could accuse me of foul play due to her sudden disappearance from the public eye. If word got out that I was protecting her, there was no telling what kind of rumors people might start bandying about.

In other words, given my present circumstances, it wouldn't be wise to turn down the ministry's request.

"You're going to have to explain some of your ideas and plans to them, I suppose," Tilty said. "What should we do? You aren't quite ready to make *that* public yet, are you?"

"Of course not! I don't have any intention of doing so! We need a better plan… Ugh, I detest the Ministry of the Arcane…!"

Those dragon materials were precious commodities. I wasn't about to let them rob me of a single piece.

Still, it would be a huge nuisance to both Euphie and Lainie if I ended up damaging my public image here. But I simply couldn't come up with any ideas that might satisfy those stuffy ministry elites.

"…Why don't you leave it to me, Lady Anis?"

"Euphie?"

She had been resting her chin on her hand, deep in thought, when she suddenly lifted her face. She had caught me by surprise.

"Leave it to you…? What do you mean exactly?" I asked.

"I know the people at the ministry don't like you, Lady Anis.

But it wouldn't do to refuse a request like this, not without good cause. Perhaps I can be of some assistance?"

"…Are you saying you'll appear in public?"

"To be honest, I don't really know the full extent of your relationship with the ministry, but I do understand that it all boils down to your behavior, your views on magic and magicology, and the magical tools you've invented. I was thinking maybe I could help reduce the tension by acting as an intermediary?"

I swallowed. Euphie was so clearly serious about this. Maybe the ministry just didn't like the idea of me holding on to so many rare dragon materials and was afraid that I might make a scene with them? In that case, I wondered if they merely needed information about my intentions.

There was some history between me and the ministry, so if I was the one beholden to them in a public forum, we might get into some conflict. But what if Euphie spoke to them instead?

"Why not? Those ministry goons hate you, but they'll have to react differently if Euphie is the one addressing them," Tilty said.

It was certainly possible. Plus, when it came to negotiating with other nobles, Euphie would certainly be more up to the challenge than I was; after all, she had been educated as a future queen.

To be honest, until now, no one had ever taken my side against the ministry. Ilia had entered the palace as a maidservant without an academy education, so the elites at the ministry never paid her any heed.

If I had a supporter, it was my father, but he had to publicly take a neutral position when it came to issues such as the distribution of monster materials. In general, he went along with my requests, but he certainly wasn't positive or proactive about it.

"…Even with you at my side, Euphie, they might still kick up a stink, you know?"

"Lady Anis." Euphie frowned at my words.

I realized then that I was perhaps *too* concerned. She was right—if she wanted to do this for me, it was my job to support her.

"…Got it. But if you're going to take center stage, we'll need to come up with something they won't be able to complain about. We're going to need a plan."

"I do have a suggestion."

While I had struggled to come up with anything, Euphie's proposal was ingenious.

* * *

On the day of my lecture to the Ministry of the Arcane, Euphie, Tilty, and I were getting ready to make our way to the royal castle.

There would apparently be a small dinner party afterward, but when all was said and done, it was still a lecture. Ilia urged me to wear a formal dress, which I staunchly refused to do.

“Are you ready, Lady Anis?” Tilty called out as she approached, her face hidden behind her usual veil.

“Ah, Tilty.”

Unusual though it was for her, she had said that she wanted to accompany us today. She was joining as a nominal co-researcher, but she wanted simply to watch from the special seating area.

She seldom ventured from her villa, she wasn’t on particularly good terms with the ministry, and she hadn’t exactly received an invitation to attend. However, she was in actual fact a collaborator of sorts, so there was no lie there. Euphie had prepared a special centerpiece to present to the ministry, and Tilty had been involved in verifying that it would indeed work.

“Thank you for waiting, Lady Anis, Tilty,” Euphie said as she approached with Lainie in tow.

She’d asked for Ilia’s assistance with her makeup today, and she was even more stunning than usual.

“Oh? I had no idea makeup could have such an effect,” Tilty teased.

“Well, Euphie’s a beautiful woman, after all.” I nodded in agreement.

Euphie herself let out an astonished sigh in response to this praise. “What are you both saying…? Anyway, it’s time. We should go.”

“Yep. We’ll be back soon, Ilia, Lainie!”

“Understood, Your Highness.”

“You can do it!”

Ilia saw us off with her usual poise, and Lainie smiled brightly at us. The two of them seemed to have really hit it off since Lainie had moved into the detached palace, and even if that was somehow due to her charm ability, I did think it was a positive development for Ilia to be paying attention to someone other than me for a change.

With a wave, we left Ilia and Lainie to make our way to the royal palace. Our meeting was taking place late in the evening. The bright moon tonight had already lit the road.

It wasn't particularly unusual for an event like this to be held there. The palace complex had several halls and venues set aside for parties and other social gatherings. We would be making use of one of them today. Because our audience would consist only of officials from the ministry, we didn't need a particularly large one.

We entered the palace and had almost reached the venue hall when I noticed a figure standing outside. I frowned slightly in surprise. I knew this man—and I knew him far better than I would like.

"It's been a while, Princess Anisphia."

He was a tall, slender, intelligent-looking young man, eye-catching and distinguished. His silver hair was tied up at the back, and the eyes behind his glasses were a cold blue color. On the whole, the impression that he gave off was rather frosty. He greeted me with a polite bow.

"…Hello to you, too, Lord Voltaire," I answered, addressing him by his surname.

"Just Lang is fine… But I've said that before, haven't I?" he remarked, adjusting his glasses with the tip of his finger.

I knew that gesture well. This man never failed to get on my nerves!

Lang was the first son of Count Voltaire and the heir to his distinguished family. He was one of the most talented young men in the ministry and had a particularly strong and influential voice. In fact, he wasn't only a persuasive speaker—he excelled at magic, too…or so people said. I had never actually seen him put those skills to use.

"I've offered to serve as a guide for your entourage today. I hope you don't mind."

"Well, I sincerely thank you. However, you didn't have to go to the trouble. Why not send someone a little lower in rank?"

"No, no. Even I pale in comparison to our kingdom's esteemed dragon slayer and savior."

"There's no need to wax lyrical…"

He seemed to be complimenting me, and I couldn't sense any hint of disrespect in his tone. On the other hand, he never showed any aversion or dislike, either. He was simply very matter-of-fact.

“And this would be your assistant, Marquis Claret’s daughter…?” he asked.

“Tilty Claret, yes. I’m just here to see whether you correctly evaluate my research findings,” she said.

“…If you’re concerned about that incident a few years back, you can file a formal protest with the Ministry of the Arcane, you realize?”

“Can I?” she retorted. “To your band of narrow-minded sycophants, with eyes only for magic and spirits?”

“…You may be the daughter of a marquis, but it would still be wise to watch your language in there…” Lang’s faced tightened, but he spoke as though nothing were amiss.

He fell silent and crossed his arms. Perhaps he had no intention of objecting to Tilty’s presence so long as she behaved herself.

“…And Lady Euphyllia Magenta?” he continued.

“Yes.” Euphie stepped forward, staring straight at him.

Lang’s eyes widened for a moment before he cleared his throat with a fake cough, placed a hand on his chest, and offered her a deep bow.

Euphie stared back in surprise at this sudden gesture. “Lord Voltaire?”

“Just Lang is fine… I’ve been hoping to meet you, Lady Euphyllia. I’m sorry our first encounter had to be like this. I’m sure the annulment of your betrothal and the ensuing commotion must have been very distressing. Please accept my deepest sympathies…”

“There’s no reason for you to bow your head to me, Lord Lang. Please, stand tall,” Euphie said, looking a little perplexed at first at this show of deference but quickly regaining her composure.

Lang lifted his head, unable to resist a direct command, though his expression was still one of remorse.

“…I’ve heard the rumors. I was hoping you might join us at the ministry after graduating from the academy, so I doubted my ears when I first heard the news. I’m truly very sorry.”

“Thank you for having such a high opinion of me. However, I wasn’t entirely blameless in what happened. I intend to reclaim my honor, by serving as Lady Anis’s assistant at this lecture today.”

“…You’re an assistant to Lady Anis?” Lang’s relatively light and friendly tone suddenly became a bit graver. He glanced my way for a split second with a probing look. “…I mustn’t keep you standing here all day. We have a waiting room set aside for you. Allow me to

show you in."

At Lang's urging, we made our way to the waiting room. None of us spoke. When we stepped inside, he motioned to the maidservants already waiting. They began to prepare tea as we took our seats. It was a refreshing change of pace, watching them use magic to light the fires and heat the pots without using any magical tools.

"Once again, I'd like to thank you for your positive response to the ministry's request," Lang said.

"I'm sure you would whine and complain if I refused," I answered with a snort.

Lang's eyebrows shot up in shock. "Please understand, Princess Anisphia. This is simply because those dragon materials are so precious. They truly are valuable."

"I didn't take *all* of them, you know? And besides, I defeated the dragon, so I have a right to them."

"As I always say, we aren't trying to take the materials from you. Rather, we would like to trade them at a fair price, to enrich the kingdom's treasury and give back to the people…"

"You're dreaming, Lang. If that were true, I wouldn't be here complaining. We're only having this conversation because we both know what a lie that is."

"If you're talking about your poor reputation, why won't you accept that the problem there is your own behavior, Princess Anisphia?"

The collision of my gaze with Lang's all but sent sparks flying. This was why I hated talking to him. He was such a hopeless idealist, the perfect example of the ministry's closed-minded elites.

"May I say something, Lord Lang?" Euphie asked, quietly stepping between us.

"What is it, Lady Euphyllia?"

"I'm ashamed to say I never graduated from the academy, so I don't have a firm grasp on the inner workings of the Ministry of the Arcane. I'm familiar with the ministry's relationship with Lady Anis, or at least what she's told me about it, but I would like to hear your view of it, if you don't mind."

"An explanation, you mean?"

"It seems to me the ministry is being too hard on her. If there has been a misunderstanding, doesn't that pose a problem for both sides? This level of stubbornness implies a deep relationship, or so

it seems to me. Therefore, as Lady Anis's assistant, I believe it's my job to help mend these ties."

…My nose wrinkled. If Euphie was going to arbitrate like this, I wouldn't be able to say anything at all.

Glancing furtively toward Lang, I saw that he was staring at Euphie. Then he reached for his glasses, repositioning them with one finger.

"I see. I *was* a little worried what Lady Anis might have told you about the ministry… If she has told you that we have been rather forceful in the past, it was only because we had her best interests in mind."

"I see. In other words, the problem rests entirely with Lady Anis, then?"

"Let me ask you this, Lady Euphyllia. Have you not felt it yourself, being in her company?"

"Felt what exactly?"

"Don't you think her behavior is too undignified for one of royal standing?"

"I can't deny that."

Euphie?! I wanted to protest but held my tongue. I forced myself to sip my tea quietly, maintaining my silence. Tilty was looking in the other direction, as though none of this concerned her.

"We in the Ministry of the Arcane are expected to lead as the Kingdom of Palettia proceeds headfirst into the future, and we simply must admonish Princess Anisphia's unseemly behavior."

"Then why would you seek to damage her reputation if she refused to hand over the materials?"

"There are those in aristocratic society who would be quick to speak up at the slightest inadequacy on our part. I also suspect some would like to remonstrate with her themselves but feel unable to do so."

"What about you, Lord Lang?" Euphie asked.

Lang's eyebrows shot up at this question. His confidence seemed to waver slightly as he adjusted his slipping glasses once more.

"I still don't understand why the ministry should so forcefully speak out against her," Euphie continued. "As a member of the royal family, she *is* rather immodest. I agree with you on that point. But is that really all there is to it?"

"…What are you trying to say, Lady Euphyllia?" Lang asked.

“It seems to me the reason you censure her so much is that you don’t like her magicology. You seem to regard it on the same level as forbidden texts… So what are your thoughts, Lord Lang?”

Lang’s eyes narrowed in response to this question. Once more, he glanced my way, fuming. I looked away.

He turned the question elsewhere. “Magicology… Magical science… What do *you* think about it, Lady Euphyllia?”

“A lot of it is rather outlandish and difficult to grasp, but I am often impressed by how her unique ideas have a way of cutting quickly to the truth at times.”

“…The Ministry of the Arcane acknowledges that her magical tools played a crucial role in defeating the dragon and that there is some value in the magicology that created them. His Majesty has spoken highly of it as well. And yet…”

“Yes?”

“…Her ideas are simply too heretical,” Lang said in a clear, flat voice. “Lady Anis’s magicology is difficult to comprehend on a number of points, and I am concerned that her ideas and perspectives—which risk overturning the kingdom’s spiritual beliefs—are unsuitable coming from a member of our royal family.”

…Ah, here it was. I had been getting this for years. From the very day that I had learned that I couldn’t use magic and chosen to pursue a new, novel approach.

If I wasn’t allowed to be a regular magic user, my only means was to resort to other powers that people, like those in the Ministry of the Arcane, regarded as heresy. I couldn’t give up on my dream, not even if it meant making enemies of everyone around me.

I knew full well that my ideas were unorthodox and that they could destroy the belief in spirits that served as the foundation of the realm. I knew it was simply unavoidable that people would dislike me—hate me, even.

“I see,” came Euphie’s quiet voice, breaking me out of my thoughts. “It’s inappropriate for Lady Anis, as a member of the royal family, to espouse heretical thoughts. I understand that. But that doesn’t make her unfit to be royalty, does it?”

“…What?” Lang frowned back at her in response to this question.

Euphie straightened her posture as she continued, “How could a deaf man appreciate music? How could we describe foods if we don’t know taste? Is it really fair to expect her to think as we do

when she was never blessed with a gift we all take for granted? If you think her inability to wield magic is a punishment of some kind, what sin exactly has she committed?"

Euphie's words spilled out gracefully like a song. I could only sit there in silence, listening with my mouth hanging slightly open. She continued to stare ahead without glancing my way, her perfectly unwavering demeanor as noble as her status.

"Did you mistrust Lady Anis from the beginning? Do you think, perhaps, that she has harbored heretical thoughts since her earliest memories? Or maybe that she didn't even once try to reach out to the spirits? Now, what on earth could be her sin? Why can't she use magic? Is it a punishment, because her ideas went against the faith as a child? Or maybe she was never granted that gift in the first place? Do *you* have any thoughts, Lord Lang?"

…For the first time ever, Euphie's presence caused me actual fear. She was hitting him with question after question, but she didn't sound emotional in her voice. She had the air of a judge expecting answers.

She was like a mirror, devoid of feeling. There was no hint of herself in those words. She had mercilessly strangled her own personality, her own self. A shiver ran over my skin just watching her.

Lang said nothing. I could see a bead of sweat trickle down his forehead to his cheek. His gaze was locked with Euphie's. He didn't dare look away.

At that moment, Euphie broke into a soft smile. She took my hand from the seat beside me and squeezed it gently. Her warmth left me at a total loss.

"Is Lady Anis truly a heretic, or has she simply stumbled on a new frontier? That isn't something I can decide on my own, but I've witnessed a brilliant guiding light in her magicology. It denies neither spirits nor magic. Instead, it illuminates a new path that I would like to traverse by her side. I hope I'll be able to share this understanding with others someday. Please enjoy today's lecture."

Just as Euphie had concluded her speech, a knock came at the door. It seemed that our time had come while we were busy talking.

Euphie was the first to rise to her feet, glancing my way with a smile as she gently pulled my hand. "Shall we go?"

* * *

As our guide led us into the lecture hall, all eyes were drawn naturally toward us. The Witch's Broom that I had presented to the ministry sometime back had been placed on the stage from which we were to give our presentation.

I made my way onto the stage with Euphie and Tilty in tow, faced the audience that had come to listen to us, and gave them all a polite curtsy.

Their reactions were mixed. As I had expected, a great many faces were watching and sizing us up. Surprisingly, few people seemed genuinely enthusiastic about listening to what we had to say.

Still, I couldn't just stand there all day focused on them. I inhaled deeply; I wanted to appear calm. Euphie and I had agreed to present this together, but I had to give the part of the lecture in which I offered an interpretation of magic and my magical tools, so I had to get myself together.

"Good evening, everyone. My name is Anisphia Wynn Palettia, and I'm very pleased to offer you this lecture today. My topic will be the materials from the dragon that I defeated recently and how best to make use of them," I said, taking care not to speak too quickly.

A sparse round of applause spread through the room. Once it had faded, I took another deep breath and continued, "But before I talk about the materials, I would like to start by showing you this—I call this a Witch's Broom. It's a magical tool used for flying."

I picked up the magical tool, holding it at chest height so that the audience could get a clear view.

"This invention makes use of wind-type spirit stones, but the individual pieces were designed in consultation with expert craftsmen. It required considerable work to get everything right, but with this Witch's Broom, one can venture forth into the sky to explore heretofore unseen regions."

The chief advantage of my Witch's Broom was that it offered improved transportation. Long-distance travel in the Kingdom of Palettia was conducted almost entirely with horses—knights and the like would ride horseback, while those who didn't know how to handle a horse would travel mainly by carriage.

Horses were expensive, and training and rearing them required considerable time and effort. My Witch's Broom wasn't exactly cheap, but it was far more forgiving than a horse once you learned how to use it.

To be honest, I wasn't used to traveling on horseback myself. Even horse-drawn carriages tended to be rather bumpy traveling along unmaintained roads, so I preferred to avoid them whenever possible. My Witch's Broom, on the other hand, consumed the rider's innate magical energy, but because of that, it could be used practically indefinitely. A horse was a living creature and needed frequent rest; a Witch's Broom needed no such thing. That point alone clearly spoke in its favor.

"It doesn't have the power to pull a cart, but it does make traveling between the capital and neighboring towns and villages much more convenient. This is the first advantage of my Witch's Broom."

"May I ask a question, Princess Anisphia?" called out a man, his hand raised. "The potential benefits of your flying magical tool are indeed great, but isn't the purpose of this lecture to explain how you plan to use the dragon materials?"

"Yes. However, I first have to offer some preliminary explanation, and the Witch's Broom is one of them. In fact, when I fought the dragon, I was able to confirm that its wings generated a special magical force that helped it stay afloat in the sky. This will be incredibly useful in further improving the Witch's Broom."

"I'll take over from here, Lady Anis." Euphie, who had been standing by my side, stepped forward with a bow.

As we had planned, I took the Witch's Broom in my arms and gave her the stage. Her taking my place was already causing a stir among the audience.

She gave them all another bow before addressing them. "I'm Euphyllia Magenta, Princess Anisphia's research assistant. I'm very happy to have been given this opportunity to address you all at the Ministry of the Arcane to talk about the future prospects of magical science, or magicology for short. I would like to continue this explanation from the point of view of a magic user."

"What do you mean?" came a voice from the crowd.

"I shall explain. When we fought the dragon the other day, I also flew on the Witch's Broom firsthand. Using that experience, I was able to fly later using magic alone."

“Impossible!”

The loudest objection yet soon erupted in the hall. The fact that Euphie had used her own magic to fly had clearly caught the attention of the ministry.

“…Well, well, that was a sudden change of heart,” Tilty observed ironically from beside me at the back of the stage.

Glancing back at her with some reproach, Euphie continued with her explanation. “It is indeed possible to fly using magic, but it requires intense training. There are still many problems, so I would like to compile a report, along with a guidebook for future users. I’m proud that my research has enabled me to identify the difficulties of flying with magic or using magical tools.”

“Am I correct in assuming that both have their own problems?” someone else asked from the audience.

Euphie nodded once more. Indeed, we had devised two separate methods to achieve flight, but both had their limitations at present.

When it came to flying using magic alone, the first and foremost problem was the difficulty in maintaining control. Not only that, but a certain magical affinity was required for flight: a strong level of skill in wind magic accompanied by a very high level of control and precision.

“Learning to fly using nothing more than pure magic, even for those who have the skill to do so, consumes a great deal of magical energy. Additionally, it’s difficult to control.”

“Hmm… So that would mean only a select few would be able to learn…”

“Yes. Having done it myself, I’m of the opinion that anyone other than me would need to be as skilled as Queen Sylphine or my father.”

The initial gasps of expectation quickly gave way to sighs of disappointment. Flying by magic alone was a difficult task even for someone widely renowned as a genius, as Euphie was. It required a great many magical aptitudes—and while I might not have been a magic user myself, even I knew that only a handful of individuals possessed the requisite level of ability.

“The advantage of the Witch’s Broom, on the other hand, is that it can be used regardless of the user’s aptitudes and abilities. That being said, the overall technique still needs considerable refinement. There’s no denying that flying this way remains quite dangerous for the time being.”

The problem with my Witch's Broom was that the technology was still rather immature. After all, I had created it to suit myself, and in its present form, I had never expected it to be used by others.

I could fly only because I had a clear image in my mind from my memories of my past life of a witch soaring through the sky on a broomstick—but that would be impossible with anyone else. On top of that, it would be difficult for anyone who didn't exercise often, such as Tilty, to maintain their balance and posture while airborne.

Then, of course, there was always the danger of falling. Even if it was good enough for flying, Euphie had pointed out to me that a broomstick might not be the best design to introduce the technology more widely… Although I was fond of it for my own personal use.

"As such, I've been thinking about using the dragon materials to help improve this flying tool."

"The dragon materials? How?" an audience member asked.

"The overall shape of a dragon's body and a number of the materials from it can be used as catalysts for magic, so I thought we might be able to build a safer flying tool if we could incorporate them into the design. I've prepared some plans for your review."

We brought out the documents that we had labored over back at the detached palace, and we distributed them to the members of the audience.

The new design was shaped differently from the Witch's Broom, modeled on the body of a dragon. I had come up with this idea for a new flying tool after Euphie had pointed out the shortcomings of my current device.

"It's modeled after a dragon soaring through the sky, so we've tentatively called it an Airdra. Unlike the Witch's Broom, the user can hold on to it in place, almost like riding a horse. And by attaching handles in place of reins, they will be able to maintain their balance while in midair. But we will need the dragon materials to design and build it."

Euphie had described flying on an Airdra as being like riding a horse, but it reminded me more of an object from my past life, something called a "*motorcycle*," or perhaps a "*Jet Ski*"—except this one glided over air!

We chose this design on the assumption that it would be easier for the people of this world to become familiar with it, and also because we would have to imitate a dragon's body if we were to

make use of the dragon materials. Thus, I had taken my knowledge of those vehicles from my past life and adapted them to the present design.

"As our research progresses, we hope to be able to mass-produce them without needing to use dragon materials. Not only will this improve transportation, but they should also be able to be used in a wide variety of situations. They could be kept at the residences of important individuals to respond to urgent matters as they arise, or to escape to safety in the event of a bandit attack, for instance."

"…I see. A broomstick is indeed a rather strange way of flying, but this…"

"It's still a curious design, but if it's more akin to riding a horse, the basic principles should at least be familiar."

The audience was calling my Witch's Broom strange and curious. Well, I couldn't deny it, but I still felt conflicted. Yet this merely served as a reminder of how important it was to choose a design that people would accept. The reason why my Mana Blade had been so widely adopted was because it was readily understandable to practically everyone.

"…That's everything that I have to say about the dragon materials. I would greatly appreciate it if you could give us all a little more time."

…Wait, Euphie? Weren't we planning to say more?

Catching sight of my confusion, she continued: "The economic advantages of a functional flying tool are as I explained a moment ago, but I am aware some in the Ministry of the Arcane may remain skeptical that Lady Anis's inventions might be viewed as blasphemy to the spirits and gods."

There's no need to go that far, Euphie! Glancing around, I could see that the expressions of those in the audience were growing stern! Even Tilty let out a soft chortle! Why did Euphie have to bring that up all of a sudden?!

I couldn't tell whether or not she realized how flustered I was, but she continued, "It's true that Lady Anis's ideas are unprecedented and bold. I understand that they seem incomprehensible to others. I myself have misunderstood them in the past. I can tell you now from close observation that magicology is founded on a respect for the spirits around us, only in a different form than we're all used to."

The attention of everyone in the hall was drawn to Euphie's dignified speech. I couldn't take my eyes off her, either. Everyone present was taken in by her words and commanding posture.

"Knowledge of the world, of reason, and of magic all come together to create magicology. It's a scientific, academic discipline, not something that disrespects faith or tradition," Euphie announced clearly.

It was true that my ideas were different from those of others, but I had been able to devise my own magic and my magical tools only because I had been born and raised in this country. She was making sure those present understood that.

…My chest tightened.

"Rather, magicology is only possible thanks to the traditions and wisdom that we've all inherited. I'm proud of the fact that Lady Anis was born here in the Kingdom of Palettia." Euphie turned to me with a broad smile.

It was truly kind. For some reason, my eyes began to feel warm. If she kept this up, I would soon be blushing with tears! Please, stop it! Wasn't this supposed to be a lecture?!

She probably didn't realize that I was internally begging her to relent. She turned back to the audience, stood proudly, and lifted a hand to her chest. "I want you all to open your eyes and see more than heretics. To look, to listen, to think. Magicology is a path to learning. It's about knowing the past, feeling the present, and looking to the future."

All of a sudden, someone placed a hand on my shoulder—it was Tilty. Her face was still hidden behind her veil, but I could tell that she was grinning. Somebody was having a good time with this.

Well, *I* wasn't amused! Not in the slightest!

"Please don't give up on this path to knowledge. Everything is in accordance with the will of the spirits. The fact that they didn't grant Lady Anis the blessing of magic wasn't because they forsook her, but rather because they acknowledged her innate talent. That's what I believe and what I would like you all to consider."

To think that someone thought so highly of me. There Euphie was, standing before me, pleading my case.

I was truly blessed to have such great company. From Ilia, to my father and mother, to the handful of people who understood and wanted to help me. I was overcome with emotion.

It was painful to be denied all this time. I may not have borne

any tangible wounds, but this desire to be recognized had long lain dormant in my heart. And now I felt as though I was truly allowed to hope.

…I wiped my eyes with my sleeve, hoping that no one had noticed the tears welling up inside them.

“The Kingdom of Palettia rose to prominence alongside the spirits when our founders entered into spirit pacts. How much time has passed since then? Now, it’s time for us to move forward with change. I would like to proceed together with all of you, to build on the foundation that has brought us this far. I hope that today will be the first step on our road to progress.” Euphie ended there, curtsying to the audience once more.

Slowly and quietly, the audience began to applaud, until the sound filled the hall.

“I hope Lady Anis and the others are all right…,” I murmured under my breath.

“Are you worried about them, Miss Lainie?” Ilia asked me.

In the absence of Lady Anis and the others, the detached palace was unusually calm and quiet. I relaxed my shoulders and sipped a cup of tea that Ilia had brewed.

I never could have imagined that I would one day be living in the royal palace, even if only in a detached villa. During my childhood, I had lived an itinerant life with my mother, and after she passed away, my home had been the orphanage.

Losing her threw my world upside down. Some children at the orphanage were cruel, and others would get into fights with one another because of me. The girls would always try to get the better of me, while the boys got into fights whenever I was around. In short, I hadn’t been blessed with good relationships.

I was tormented by the affections of people I didn’t especially want around me, and in the end, I stopped expecting anything at all from other people. My life’s turning point had been my first encounter with my father.

Apparently, I was the spitting image of my mother; when my father heard about my situation and realized that I was his, he took me in and did his best to raise me as the child of a nobleman. He regretted having lived such a hard life during his youth that he hadn’t been able to protect my mother.

My stepmother recognized that my father loved my birth mother and married him anyway. She welcomed me with open arms even though I wasn’t her own child. I was happy—truly, almost unbelievably, happy.

When she learned by chance that I could use magic, she was as overjoyed as she might have been had she discovered that ability in herself. She recommended that I enter the Aristocratic Academy in the firm belief that it would be in my best interests. I had my anxieties about this, but I wanted to do something for the family that had welcomed me into its ranks so warmly.

…But I had no idea that I was a vampire or that I had these strange

powers…

Looking back on it all, all those inexplicable situations in which I had found myself over the years suddenly made sense. And the more I thought about my life at the Aristocratic Academy, the more pain I felt. If I had only recognized these powers for myself, none of this would have happened.

Lady Anis had called it all an unforeseeable, inescapable force. Yet I had done something terrible. Because of me, people's emotions had been led astray, and I had caused irreparable harm to so many. I didn't know how to even begin atoning for this sin.

Even now, Lady Anis was offering me her full protection, but I remained unable to repay her or the others in any meaningful way. I didn't want to always be on the receiving end of other people's generosity, but there was nothing that I could do about it…

"Miss Lainie."

"Eeek!"

All at once, Ilia poked me between the eyes with a finger, breathing out a sigh. "Too much worry will scare happiness away, you know?"

"Lady Ilia…"

"This might not be much consolation now, but the more difficult a situation, the more time you need to solve it. After all, if it could be resolved easily, it wouldn't be a bother to anyone in the first place… Your tea is getting cold, by the way."

As she had pointed out, I hadn't taken any more than a sip of my tea. Realizing that I should finish it before it became undrinkable, I raised the cup to my lips. Since becoming a member of a noble family, I had had more opportunities to drink tea than I knew what to do with. I couldn't say why this simple beverage made me feel so at ease, but I certainly didn't dislike it.

Watching Ilia, who was constantly so hard at work and always preparing tea for everyone, I was struck by how poised and cool she looked. She was supposed to be of a higher noble rank than I was, and yet here she was working as a maidservant… I admired her deeply.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"No, nothing."

Living a normal life would be difficult as a vampire. I would have to spend some time thinking about my future. When I first began considering my options, Ilia was the first person to come to mind.

Perhaps if I could work as a maidservant like her, I would be able to repay Lady Anis…? Maybe I should ask her to teach me in the near future?

As I was contemplating all this, the lights in the salon suddenly went out.

"Huh?"

Being the middle of the night, it was too dark to see anything. Puzzled, I began to speak up when a hand suddenly covered my mouth.

"Keep quiet," Ilia whispered in my ear. There was a hint of tension in her voice. "Listen to me carefully, Miss Lainie. Someone must have infiltrated the villa."

"What?!"

"As you know, very few people have access to the detached palace. Lady Anis prepared this alarm just in case, but I never thought we would ever actually need it…"

"So the lights going out…?"

"It's an emergency shutdown that activates when a magical tool has been stolen or disturbed. Only those who know how to use magical tools can restart it… So we have an intruder."

I swallowed hard. Someone had snuck inside, and now my

heart was racing in a panic. Ilia patted me on the back, calming my ragged breathing.

"…What should we do?" I asked.

"…Let's leave the building. Our only choice is to seek protection at the royal palace. It will be too dangerous if we're discovered here. Fortunately, I know the layout of the detached palace like the back of my hand. I could practically walk these corridors blindfolded."

After working here for so long, Ilia certainly had no need for lit hallways to navigate the villa.

She took my trembling hand in her own and rose to her feet. "Hold your breath and keep quiet. Be careful of any unexpected noises. If you hear or see someone, hide. Squeeze my hand once if you understand, twice if you want me to stop. Are we clear?" she whispered in my ear.

I squeezed once.

With that, she began to lead me by the hand through the corridors of the villa, now in utter darkness.

Moonlight shone in through the windows lining the corridor. Lady Ilia moved quickly, keeping to the shadows. Silencing my breath, I followed behind her, doing my best not to make a sound.

But who on earth would do this…?

Lady Anis was currently giving a lecture at the royal palace at the request of the Ministry of the Arcane. Had whoever snuck into the villa known about that? Were they here for the dragon materials? I must have been trying to distract myself from my nervousness, as my thoughts kept spinning around in circles.

All of a sudden, a shiver of anxiety ran over me. Something was clearly wrong, but I couldn't figure out precisely what. I squeezed Ilia's hand twice.

"Oh no! Miss Lainie!"

"Yes?!"

"If only I could see properly! It's fog! It might be poisonous, so don't breathe it in! We'll have to go out through the window! Hang on!"

Fog. I finally understood what I was feeling around me—the air was damp with fog. There was no light, so I hadn't realized it until now. Worried about the poison, I held my breath, while Ilia grabbed ahold of me from one side before dashing toward a nearby window.

She used the shoulder on her other side to break clear through the glass and shield me from the shards. The momentum sent us both hurtling through the air as the moon filled my vision.

"You're as fast on your feet as ever. But you underestimate us."

When that voice reached my ears, I was convinced that it was a hallucination.

At that moment, Ilia let go of my hand, and I fell crashing to the ground. As I pushed my aching body up, I watched as she tossed back her skirt to cast her magic.

"Fire Arrow!"

A flaming arrow took shape before her, coursing toward the source of the voice. The worry on her face was clear in the light from the flames.

The fiery projectile disappeared into the darkness as though deflected by something. Looking carefully, I could make out a wall of ice in its path—and something else was rearing up behind it.

"…?!"

A whip comprised entirely of water shot out with tremendous force, coiling through the air like a snake and piercing Ilia's shoulder. Ilia had jumped up to try to avoid it, but the whip threw her hard to the ground.

"Lady Ilia!" I cried out, rushing toward her and taking her in my arms.

Blood spattered through the air, and I could smell the life force that she had offered to me countless times over.

Her face as she held on to my arms was perfectly illuminated in the moonlight. I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

"I won't apologize," the voice said. "I won't even ask your forgiveness… But it's a shame it had to be like this, Lainie…"

The next moment, there was a gut-wrenching pain in my chest. My vision turned a brilliant red.

* * *

…I just want to go home…

While our lecture to the Ministry of the Arcane had come to a successful conclusion, I found myself nonetheless struck by a wave of melancholy.

Euphie's presentation had been flawless, and she was now busy

chatting with various members of the audience. Tilty was keeping to a corner of the hall, filling herself with food. *Maybe I should join her for a snack while I wait for Euphie to finish…*

"That was a wonderful presentation, Princess Anisphia. Do you have a moment to talk?"

"Oh…? Ah…"

As the cocktail party got underway, a young man standing by himself approached me before I could reach the buffet tables. At first glance, he seemed strangely on edge.

There was something familiar about him, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

While I was wondering where I recognized him from, he offered me a dignified bow before introducing himself. "I'm Moritz Chartreuse. We've never spoken in person before, Your Highness…"

Now I remembered! He was Count Chartreuse's son?! Why was he going out of his way to talk to me? And wasn't he being awfully modest? What was he doing out and about while Allie and Navre were still practically under house arrest?

"I'm humbled by your generosity, Princess Anisphia. I'd like to take this opportunity to apologize for all the trouble we caused…"

"To me? What for? You've never done anything to *me*."

"To Lady Euphyllia. My father gave me a good talking-to and told me to reflect on my failings. Even if you managed to salvage the situation, Your Highness, I did something terribly underhanded…"

"Right…"

Moritz, right? I reminded myself. He was wearing an apologetic smile, but I couldn't guess what was going on inside his head. That subtle, quintessentially aristocratic expression of his was practically impossible to read.

Despite his words, I couldn't pin down how he really felt about Euphie. At the very least, his apology didn't strike me as sincere.

"This event was my idea. I thought it might make a good opportunity to help Lady Euphyllia redeem herself. If you could put in a good word for me…"

"…Why? If you don't mind me asking…I thought you were friends with Allie…er, Algard, I mean."

I was certainly startled to hear that the son of the director of the Ministry of the Arcane had been the guiding force behind this event. He was supposed to be firmly in Allie's camp, so I couldn't

wrap my head around any possible motive.

"After what happened with Lady Euphyllia, I came to a realization… I wanted to hear from you personally about those magical tools we've all ignored for so long. That's how I decided a presentation would be ideal."

"So this wasn't the ministry's idea, but yours? I must admit, I'm a little taken aback to hear that… And what do you mean, you *came to a realization*?"

"I wanted an opportunity to learn more about your study of magicology, seeing as how undervalued it has been up till now."

…No, this didn't sit well with me at all. There was something behind his mask, but I couldn't guess what it was.

"I see," I replied. "Unfortunately, the presentation is over, and we've already moved on to the cocktail party. There are plenty of people here you could discuss this with."

"You don't want to speak with me…? Ah, are you still upset?"

"…Excuse me?"

Frankly, I hadn't given him much thought at all, but I could hardly say that. I was racking my brain trying to think of a suitable response.

I glanced around the hall and spotted Tilty, standing by herself. As our gazes met, she glared across at me, as though warning me to keep her out of this. Too bad; I had found a perfect excuse to remove myself from this situation!

"Excuse me, I need to discuss something with my friends…"

"Your friends? By all means, won't you introduce me to them?"

Hold on there, don't chase after me like that! Maybe I should just come out with it and tell him that he's getting on my nerves?! This was getting creepy. I just wanted him to leave me alone!

"She's shy around strangers, so if you'll excuse me."

"Ah, please don't say such things, Your Highness!"

He just didn't give up! And why was he speaking in such a loud voice? And with such exaggerated gestures? Because of him, everyone around us was starting to stare my way.

Ugh, even Tilty was glowering at me. Her gaze was warning me not to come any closer! *You heartless coward, give me a hand here!*

"Um, Lord Chartreuse? There's no need for any apologies," I managed to say as politely as I could. "I don't think anything of it."

"That won't do! I insist, I'll say whatever it takes to get you to forgive me…! What must I do to convey the depths of my regret in

words?!”

Wh-why wouldn’t he back down?! He was squinting back at me, his face charged with energy. What was going on here? Why was he doing this all of a sudden? Was he emotionally unstable or something? What did I need to do to get out of here?!

“People are staring. Please, calm down. I’ve finished my lecture for tonight, but if we have another chance to meet…”

“That won’t do at all…!”

No, he simply wasn’t listening. Faced with no other option, I spun around, turning my back on him to signal that I was finished talking, when—

Chiiiiing…

A high-pitched noise sounded off in the distance, catching the attention of everyone gathered. My eyes widened in understanding. I couldn’t possibly mistake that sound. After all, I had developed it myself.

“Ilia…?”

It was the alarm system that I had given Ilia in case of an emergency. The detached palace was a short distance from the royal palace, but I had made sure that it could be heard from afar so that I would be notified if anything was amiss.

I hadn’t expected to hear it go off today of all days, and I nearly ran out the door then and there. But I was not allowed to.

“What’s that noise?! Everyone, stick close! Don’t go outside!” Moritz cried out as he grabbed my arm, issuing instructions throughout the hall.

The remaining guests, already concerned about the noise, were following the orders.

I couldn’t care less about all that, but with Moritz gripping my arm so firmly, I couldn’t get away from him.

“Hey! Let go of me!” I yelled.

“I can’t! You mustn’t leave until we can work out what that noise was just now…!”

“It’s from one of my magic tools! Something’s happening at the detached palace!”

“…All the more reason for you to say here, then! It’s too dangerous! Please, calm down…! Someone, someone, come quick! Princess Anisphia is hysterical! Someone, give me a hand!”

Which one of us was acting hysterical?! Moritz’s fingers were practically digging into my arm. As the pain and indignation

coursed through my flesh, something snapped inside me.

As though responding to my emotions, a powerful wave of heat burst out from a certain area on my back. Magical energy was emanating from my body at a seething boil, illuminating me with a pale aura as I grabbed Moritz's arm with my free hand.

"Ngh, gaaaah! A-augh, l-let go! Let go of me!" he screamed. Pathetic.

I could hear the sounds of bones creaking and flesh tightening. Only then did I snap out of it, baring my teeth. "Let go of *you*?! I told *you* to let go of *me*…!"

I grabbed his arm and wrenched it off of me. Only then did he release his grip—and then I heard a scream.

Everyone was staring my way in terror. The magical energy that had flared up in response to my anger was still shimmering, still clinging to my body.

"It's a…d-dragon…!" someone cried, pointing to me with a trembling finger.

I hissed in annoyance. I didn't have time for this. I needed to get back home as soon as possible.

"What are you all doing?! *Gulp…!* S-seize her, that monster princess!" cried an impassioned, panicked voice.

It was Moritz. He was glaring my way, his eyes bloodshot, possessed by some concoction of fear and anger. He began to crawl away as our eyes locked—yet his teetering limbs seemed unable to coordinate their movements, and he couldn't escape.

"G-gaaah! Y-you monster!"

Then, perhaps delirious, he began to unleash a potent magic spell. I paused for a moment, unsure whether he truly meant to attack me or not, when a simple magical projectile came hurtling my way.

I raised my arm at once to protect myself—but at the same moment, a shadow rushed in.

It was Euphie. Before I knew it, she had pulled out the Arc-en-Ciel, deployed its magic-infused blade, and swept away the blast.

"E-Euphyllia!" Moritz cried out, his face contorting with a toxic brew of hatred, resentment, and jealousy.

Euphie, however, paid him only a moment's notice. She turned to me, holding out her free hand. "Lady Anis!"

"Euphie! Where's the window facing the detached palace?!"

I took her hand in mine as we ran off. She seemed to have

already figured out the shortest route. As we approached the far wall, a group of people began to brace themselves with canes. They intended to block our path.

"Move! Are you trying to hold back a royal princess?!" Euphie cried.

Faced with this indignation, the group froze in place—just as a wave of darkness spread out, all but seeping from the floor.

That darkness ensnared the feet of everyone except Euphie and me.

I stared wide-eyed at the group caught by the writhing darkness, when a voice sounded from behind. "What's this, huh?! Having a little fun, are we?! A little rebellion?! That's what this is, isn't it?! You lot must be desperate, eh?! Why can't you just keep out of the way?! Fine! I'll take you all on…! Come here! How about this?!"

"Tilty!"

That idiot was unleashing all manner of magic, throwing moderation to the wind. The creeping darkness overflowing throughout the hall, enveloping the floor and everyone standing on it, too, was coming from her.

"That combination of magical attributes… It's amazing! The degree of control is incredible…!" Euphie exclaimed.

If not for her condition, Tilty would have ranked alongside Euphie in terms of magical ability. The problem, of course, was her physical constitution!

"What are you doing, Anis?! Get outta here! You'll make this harder!" she shouted.

"What are *you* doing?! Are you out of your mind?!" I fired back.

"Don't worry! I'll take care of this! Unless you want to get caught up in it, too?!"

I hesitated for a moment as Tilty shouted across the room, but I couldn't ignore the alarm still blaring outside. Ilia's face floated up before me, and that image cleared away all indecision.

"Don't overdo it, you idiot! The last thing you want to do is end up killing someone!" I turned away from Tilty. "Ready, Euphie?"

"Yes!"

Euphie and I ran toward the window, our hands interlinked. As we reached the glass, I took a step forward—and in perfect unison, Euphie unleashed her wind magic to shatter the windows.

We leaped straight through and into the air. Euphie tugged at

my hands, pulling me into her arms, and concentrating all her strength, took off in the direction of the detached palace.

"I'll fly us!"

"Please!"

With her magical flying technique, we headed straight for the villa. Just outside the building, I spotted a figure illuminated in the moonlight.

"Euphie! Down there!" I pointed in its direction.

She glanced over there and dropped down close to the ground. Once we were on our feet, we took in the scene before us.

Lainie was sprawled on the ground, covered in blood. Quivering, Ilia was crouching beside her as she held her by the shoulders.

I gasped. Across from Lainie and Ilia stood another figure. The swirling wind was gathering the clouds, further blocking the moonlight around it, but I could see a young man with platinum-colored hair just like my own. His clothes were soaked with blood, no doubt from the wound at his chest.

And his furious eyes, meeting mine…were dyed an ominous crimson.

"…You're well prepared. Every single time. I knew you would stand against me in the end."

I clenched my fists at the sound of that voice. My nails dug into my palms, the bones in my hand creaking from the pressure. *Why?!* I wanted to scream, glaring across at him—my brother, Allie.

"…What's the meaning of this…? Prince Algard?!"

"…Euphyllia?"

Allie glanced bleakly toward Euphie, while she stared back at him in disbelief.

I took a step forward. Allie didn't move, but Euphie held the Arc-en-Ciel at the ready. Finally, I reached Ilia's and Lainie's side.

Ilia stared up at me. "…Lady…Anis…"

She was clearly stunned. She had sustained a deep wound to her shoulder, which was still bleeding freely and soaking her clothes. She weakly held Lainie's hand.

"…I…I'm…so…sorry…," her voice rattled weakly, her gaze fixed on Lainie.

"It's all right," I said to her. "Don't talk."

Lainie was still breathing, albeit shallowly. Her upper body had sustained a grievous injury. She coughed several times, no doubt on

her own blood.

"Lainie," I said quietly.

"…Lady…Anis…?" Her gaze, unfocused until now, turned to me. As she recognized my face, her complexion turned even paler. "…I…I…"

"Hold on. It's all right. Just hold on."

"…Anis… Prince…Algard…he…has…my…" Though she could hardly muster her voice, she was trying desperately to say something.

I pressed a finger softly against her lips. There was no need to say any more.

"I know. I'll handle it from here…" I looked away, fighting to suppress my emotions. "Euphie! I need you to heal them both!" I called out.

Euphie dropped to her knees as I rose to my feet to stand guard. Holding the Arc-en-Ciel, she immediately set about casting a healing spell. "…Ngh… Lady Anis… I can help Ilia…but Lainie…"

"I know. But she's a vampire—there are still other options available to us," I said.

"But look! Her magicite, it's been—"

"I know, I know. Just do your best. Please."

"…I…I understand."

There could be no mistaking that Lainie had suffered a fatal wound. Her chest was torn open, as though her assailant had aimed straight for her heart. It was a miracle that she was breathing at all.

That was proof enough that she wasn't entirely human. That miracle would not have been possible without the magicite. And the monster who had stolen that magicite had to be him.

"…Are you done talking?"

"…Hello to you, too, Allie."

My brother was simply standing there quietly. The wind passed between us, the moon shining through a thin layer of cloud cover.

"The Ministry of the Arcane requested that lecture because of you, I take it?" I asked.

"You could say that. Didn't Moritz tell you? It was his idea."

"So you aren't even trying to hide it…" I let out a tense breath.

Moritz had meant to keep me away from the detached palace so that Allie would carry out his true purpose—robbing Lainie of her magicite.

Was it possible that the two of them had been aware all along

that Lainie was a vampire? If the Ministry of the Arcane was involved, that suggested that Count Chartreuse was part of their conspiracy.

"You've got a lot of nerve…," I growled under my breath.

"Me? You made the first move. You caused Father a great deal of distress when you decided to take down that dragon without anyone's permission."

"…Weren't you affected by Lainie's charm powers? And now you've done this."

"I'm fond of her, I really am. What's your point? You think *that's* what's behind all this?" Allie's tone suggested that he found the very idea absurd.

I paused. He didn't seem to be lying. He truly did like her—and yet that hadn't stopped him from striking her so fiercely.

"If a man is to be king, he can't allow his feelings to sway his judgment. That's been drummed into me ever since I was a child. Emotions come second," he said.

"…So you didn't even hesitate? Do you really think that's a just course of action? Answer me, Allie. Justify to me why a would-be king ought to become a vampire!"

There was a long scar visible on his chest, suggesting he had shoved something inside himself, with the wound healing on top of it. And from the way that his eyes had changed color, there could be no mistaking what he had done.

He had used the magicite to transform himself into a vampire. That had been his goal. He had drawn me away knowing full well that Lainie would remain behind. Only then had he attacked.

"How did you know she was a vampire in the first place? And why didn't you tell Father?! And how *dare* you actually use that power!"

"I don't need to hear this from the likes of *you*. Why don't you explain your little dragon aura? How is that any different from me seeking the powers of a vampire?"

I felt a lump in my throat. Yes, this was a dragon aura. On that point, I couldn't deny that I wasn't altogether different from what he had become.

However, I hadn't embedded the magicite inside my own body. In my case, the aura had been carved into my skin, so to speak. I had melted the dragon magicite and several other materials together to create a special ointment that could *imprint* the powers

of a dragon on my back.

It was a marking, a tattoo of a kind—and it fed on my own magical energy to generate dragon magic. It was an indirect way of harnessing draconic magical potential—altogether different from taking those powers into oneself directly. I called it an Impressed Seal.

In the Kingdom of Palettia, those who committed grave offenses were branded on their backs to mark them as criminals, which was why Euphie had been incredibly reluctant to let me do this at first. But I had insisted, because it was the only way.

Activating the Impressed Seal gave me these powers in a dragon-like form. That was why so many in the hall earlier had shrunk back in fear.

"…Our roles are different, Allie. We are not the same."

"Indeed. You're a princess who abandoned her claim to the throne, while I'm the crown prince, first in line to succeed. Our roles *are* different."

"Then why do this?"

"This was only ever meant to be a last resort. But after you made such a mess of my plans, I had no choice but to act by myself."

"What plans…?"

"To use Lainie's vampiric abilities to seize control of the kingdom and secure my throne."

"…What?"

I could hardly believe what my brother had just said. He wanted to use the powers of a vampire to take control of the country? To secure the throne? My head was spinning, trying to make sense of it all.

"You were the first wrinkle, Euphyllia."

"…Me?" Euphie stammered in confusion as she continued trying to heal Lainie.

Allie let out a disgusted snort. "You were immune to Lainie's powers of attraction. She never affected you in the slightest. That made you an obstacle to my plans. That's why I had to eliminate you. And with her powers, it would only take a small push to ruin your social standing."

"What…?!" Euphie trailed off. Her concentration wavered, interrupting the spell that she was casting over Lainie. Her forehead was already drenched in sweat from her healing efforts. Her

attention had been fully focused on helping Lainie.

Allie continued, “You were my second miscalculation, Sister.”

“…Because I took Euphie under my wing to try to restore her honor?”

“Exactly. I was separated from Lainie and instructed to avoid going out in public. Because of you, not only could I not move freely, I lost access to Lainie, too. You’ve always been a thorn in my side. You even ruined my chances of defeating the dragon and freeing myself.”

“But why would you even make such a plan?! You would have become king anyway! You didn’t need to rely on any vampire powers to do that…!” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

Allie raised his voice louder still to forestall my objection. “You can’t be serious. If you mean that, then you’ve never really been paying attention. You’ve just been indulging your own wants and desires.” His stare sharpened, piercing me through the heart. I had never before seen a colder, more malevolent figure. “How many people do you really think would welcome me as our next ruler? How many times do I have to hear everyone whispering behind my back? *Oh, if only Princess Anisphia had been born with magic.* Well?”

I bit my lip, lowering my gaze. I couldn’t say that I was unaware of such opinions. I had even had such thoughts myself at times.

I had long wished for the ability to wield magic. If I could only use it, I would be able to win people’s respect, and my magicology research would get the recognition that it deserved.

“You’ve realized it, too, haven’t you? That’s why you’re always putting on airs,” he said. “Your talent isn’t *unappreciated*. It’s *feared*. Am I wrong?”

“…I don’t know. I wouldn’t know.”

“You’re a monster.”

A monster. Those words hurt far more than I would have expected. I had been called a heretic more times than I could count, but before today, no one had ever labeled me a monster. Before I knew it, a small, crackling laugh escaped my throat.

“A mere human couldn’t possibly keep up with you,” Allie declared. “Not without transforming his very being. You *made* me do this.”

“No! That isn’t what I wanted you to become, Allie! I wanted you to be a king who values people and relationships, who works

with everyone around him to rule in harmony!"

"Be a king in name only, you mean?!" he shouted back. The force of his response left me in stunned silence. His blazing anger continued to grow more intense. "Relationships? Working together? Have you not seen the nobles in this country?! The rifts between them and the average commoner?! This abomination of a society was created by the kingdom itself! Our aristocrats sneer and scoff at anyone who can't wield magic! Our blessings are now just a symbol of power and our inflated self-worth! This royal blood of ours is just for show! I would have been Euphyllia's pawn! A king for her to wield as she pleased! A cog to keep the machinery of the realm running! But where am I in all that?! Where's the person *I* want to be?! You don't need me for anything!"

Allie was screaming now. His shoulders were trembling as he caught his breath. Then he glanced up at me with his crimson eyes, and his features became distorted and devilish. "Nothing changes! Nothing! Without change, the whole realm will remain stagnant! The same thing over and over again. Bloodlines! Authority! Tradition! Magic! Is that all there is?! Nothing will ever bridge the gap between us and the common masses! Even when so much of that precious blood has entered their ranks over our long history, the previous king decided to honor commoners and give them noble titles—to bring that precious blood back into the fold! And what did our subjects do in response?!"

Allie was referring to our father's predecessor—our grandfather. For generations, the blood of the nobility had become mixed with that of the common folk, so that individuals with magical talent would sometimes appear even among those not born to noble families.

At the time, such magically gifted commoners were branded as bandits. My grandfather, dissatisfied that so much latent talent was going to waste, set into motion a policy to integrate that blood back into society by creating a new class of aristocrats—and so his subjects took up arms in revolt.

The rebellion was spearheaded by those nobles who didn't want to accept commoners into their own ranks. They refused to accept magic users who weren't nobles, and they refused to accept nobles who weren't magic users. The realm fell into chaos and nearly split in two.

My father's older brother, who had been the crown prince at

the time, had stood at the forefront of that rebellion. Our parents' generation had been at the center of the conflict—my father, my mother, Lord Grantz, and all the others.

Nonetheless, I couldn't exactly say that people's broader perceptions had changed as a result of everything that had happened. The kingdom had existed hand in hand with magic for countless generations. Its history and traditions were all predicated on magic, and so its authority would never wane. If Allie was saying that the structure of the kingdom itself had created a warped, invisible divide between its nobles and its common people, I couldn't deny that charge.

"This country is sick, like a great tree rotting at the roots. Someone has to plant fresh shoots, yet no one is willing to stop the rot! Even those touted as geniuses are blinded by their own brilliant talent! They care only for maintaining present systems!"

I could see Euphie catch her breath at Allie's accusatory cries. It was clear enough to whom he was referring.

"If no one else is willing to make changes, I have to do it myself! This power grants me enough strength to crush what everyone takes for granted. Even if I have to surrender my own humanity to do it, I will be more than a mere bauble! I will be a king! Otherwise, what good would I be?! I refuse to be a bandage holding together a kingdom while it rots at its core!"

"…Allie," I began.

"I know better than anyone that I lack real talent. I don't excel, and no matter how hard I try, everything's always just out of reach. All because of you! Because of *you*, Anisphia Wynn Palettia!" he raged.

That full name as a royal princess weighed heavily on my shoulders.

All my life, I had wanted to escape from that weight, which was why I had renounced my claims as First Princess and relinquished my right to the throne. I thought I had left it behind.

"They mock you because they are afraid! Your innovation fills them with dread! There's no monster more terrifying than a noble house intent on preserving the status quo!" Allie screamed, his voice hoarse as he waved his arms above his head. He had called me a monster, and now he was denouncing me. "And worst of all, you threatened the authority of the aristocracy with your heretical study of magicology! No wonder the common people love you! No

wonder the nobility despises you! To the people, you're a pioneer pushing forward into the unknown! To the aristocracy, you're a monster at the gates! A monster and a hopeless fool! There has never been anyone like you!"

"…And *that's* why you wanted more power? Do you understand how dangerous that is?"

"I need this power to rule the kingdom and enact real change! I will stand at the top and forge a new realm using the privileges *you* surrendered! The future *you* didn't choose! What right do you have to complain if I pick up the pieces you threw away?!"

For a split second, Allie's voice sounded far away. I felt as if I were watching someone else being berated—and yet I was the one standing directly in front of him.

"…Allie, I have one question for you," I said as I reached for the Mana Blade that I kept in its holder at my waist. Activating the weapon, I planted my feet and faced my brother head-on. "…What does magic mean to you?"

"It's a curse, Sister." The hatred in his voice made himself clear. To him, magic was an abomination. "Yes, you heard me. It's a curse. All of it—magic, this royal blood, the title of crown prince, this image everyone has of how it's all supposed to be. It leaves me empty inside. I'll destroy it all. If that's the only way to bring this accursed system to an end, then so be it."

"I see." I glanced up at the sky. The moon was shining brightly. Slowly, I closed my eyes, trying to keep that image in my memory.

What name was I supposed to give these thoughts and feelings welling up inside me? I couldn't understand them. I didn't *want* to understand them, so I opened my eyes, letting my unnamed emotions wash through me and become a part of me.

"All right, Algard," I said. "I suppose it's true, I did throw all that away."

I kept my voice calm, smothering my emotions. There was no need to overthink this. Everything began to feel cold. The Impressed Seal on my back had the same side effects as the ether drug that I had concocted and tended to make its user aggressive and easily agitated. I pushed the heat swirling inside me to the back of my mind, throttled it with my hands, and crushed it before continuing.

"But I'll never accept this. If you're intent on taking up the future I discarded, then I'll take up the rights you're abandoning here and now."

I couldn't deny the sickness deep at the kingdom's core, but I was willing to disregard it. Of course, I helped as many people as I could on my own. I prayed to bring joy to everyone in my power. However, I had given up on changing the power structures all by myself.

This power called *magic* may well have warped society. The nobility had become caught up in that distorted way of thinking; it had become something alien to the common people. There was some truth to the accusation that magic, in today's world, had become a symbol of authority that existed only to serve the interests of a select few.

However, if I was to try to change that…it wasn't hard to imagine the consequences. Practically any course of action would risk destroying the kingdom… That's why I had given up on doing so.

"Do you know why I've let everyone call me crazy? Why I've gone to these extremes?" I said. "I did it all for you—although you'll probably just call that another curse. But you're making these changes by force. You need to inflict pain; you need to inflict damage to drive it. What need is there to rush things along in that way? A king only in name is proof that the royal family is secure, that the country is at peace. What's so bad about that?"

I had always been convinced that, between us, Allie would make the better ruler for precisely that reason. He might not have had extraordinary talent, but I respected him for his work ethic and patience. I had always believed he would make it to the end, no matter how long it took.

"You're angry because you can't do more than what other people can do, but what else did you expect? That's what it means to be human. What's wrong with just doing your best to work with others? Not through brute force but with wishes and your words."

Apparently, I had drawn so much notice to myself that Allie had taken to thinking of me as a monster. It had all worked to his benefit, though. After all, no one would want to make me queen if they thought I was out of my mind.

I pressed on. "Do you really think forcing people into rapid changes while ruling with an iron fist is what they want? If you can't even understand that much, you don't deserve to call yourself king."

I remembered leading him by the hand more times than I could

count. I had told him all about my dreams. Our time together as giggling, smiling children had long since passed, but I still remembered it as clear as day.

He had gotten into plenty of trouble because of me. If he blamed me for that, if he thought all this was my fault, I wouldn't hold that against him. I would take responsibility as his older sister.

"Algard, are you so conceited that you think you can win on the same field as me?"

"Sister!"

"If power is everything, then show me what you have. All you had to do was be a good ruler. A king who knows how to worry, how to consult, how to share his ideals with others, and how to bring people together."

"Maybe that's what a good king looks like to you, but that kind of leader can't change anything meaningful! Without power, the world will never change!"

"You can't even see the value of protecting what we already have! I can't accept a king like that!"

My father had never been a forceful king. What he lacked in ambition, my mother and Duke Grantz easily made up for. He was a gentle leader who favored ruling a peaceful, contented realm. He was particularly forgiving during his reign. He had even allowed me to have my freedom.

But Allie hadn't been granted what I had taken for myself. I understood that now.

To you, my wishes and prayers were nothing but a curse, weren't they? I'm probably guilty of not having realized that. We're brother and sister, connected by blood, but we've drifted so far apart.

"There can be no happiness for a people ruled by a king who's lost his humanity."

"You're wrong. Some things can't be changed by a mere man, and if we don't destroy them and push forward, there will be no tomorrow either for the realm or for our subjects!"

"Even if that were true, neither could survive if everything changed too quickly! Especially for a people with as long a history as ours. It would be too much!"

"You're just afraid of change! Of responsibility! Listen to yourself! You… What right do you have to criticize me?!"

"I'm a sister who wants to stop her insane brother."

"What nonsense!"

“Yes… What nonsense indeed.”

It was too late. My brother was beyond saving. Still, there was something that I wouldn’t give up on, no matter what.

“I won’t let you turn magic into a curse. Magic brings about happiness and grants our wishes for tomorrow. I’ll prove it to you.”

“Will you?! Who do you expect to listen?! Unless you force this country to change, your empty idealism won’t get you anywhere! You can’t close the gulf between the nobility and the commoners—you’ll simply tear them even farther apart!”

“But I can’t just look away while someone tries to destroy the realm. Do you really think that’s the way to bring about lasting change? Do you, Algard?”

I decried his plans—but at the same time, I was pleading with my little brother. I had to know whether he truly believed what he was saying even if I wouldn’t like the answer.

“Stop it! Don’t you look down on me! You can’t judge me! And don’t you *dare* show me pity!”

“Algard…”

“I’ll make it change! I have to! This hellish reality cannot stand! This decrepit kingdom cannot stay the same! I don’t care who it is—I won’t let anyone get in my way!”

“…Ah, so it’s come to this. I feel sorry for our parents, having to put up with a son too stupid to even face them directly.”

I held my Mana Blade out at the ready. I clearly wasn’t getting through to him, and there was no point wasting any more time talking.

“Ready yourself, Algard. I refuse to accept your vision.”

* * *

Algard Von Palettia was a prince of ordinary talent. He was, of course, a hard worker, but no matter how much sweat he poured into his efforts, he couldn’t close his eyes to the brilliant talent that could be found all around him. Such was his unhappy lot in life.

By his side, he might have had Euphyllia Magenta, a magical genius beloved by spirits. Rumors had followed him for years that, if not for his princely status, Algard would have clearly ranked behind her in skill and talent.

Meanwhile, people constantly compared him to his sister,

Princess Anisphia Wynn Palettia, always spearheading her latest heresies. Whether it was her concept of magicology or the invention of her magical tools, her antics never failed to attract attention, both good and bad.

Yet Algard had nothing of his own to offer. He had no eye-catching talent, no earth-shattering ideas. That led him down the path of seeking power. If people wouldn't heed him as they did her, then he was left with no choice but to change the very fabric of the world.

There would be no happy end to this tragedy.

Algard Von Palettia would never find happiness.
Without wings, he would never be able to soar freely.

Nor would Anisphia Wynn Palettia find happiness.
Though she had won wings of her own, she was forever bound to her country.

…If there was a difference to be found between them…it was that she was free to choose whether to take to the air or stay close to the ground, while he lacked wings of his own and had to pursue another path.

This is the tale of those two siblings.

Let's analyze this.

My thoughts turned coldly in my head. If Allie's aptitudes were the same as when he had been a child, then he had an affinity for water-type and ice-type magic. So long as his vampiric transformation hadn't changed that, he would no doubt attack using one of those two elemental types.

However, I couldn't be entirely certain. I didn't have enough information. That being the case, my best option was to wait for him to make the first move. I lunged toward him, lashing out with my Mana Blade in a superficial strike. He dodged my first attack before leaping backward to keep his distance.

"Water Cutter!" he shouted.

A blade of water came flying at me, but I quickly cut through it with my Mana Blade. Next, I broke through the pursuing onslaught of water, leaped from the ground to maintain my speed, and closed the distance as I raced toward him.

For his part, my brother continued to swing his arm like an orchestra conductor, casting further blades of water coursing my way with each step. I adjusted my movements, throwing myself into a sideways roll to leap to safety.

He's good at interception, but that's about it.

When it came to magic, Allie possessed real skill, but it was nothing more than that. He didn't have Euphie's finesse or Tilty's furious attack power. If this was the extent of his abilities, I could handle him.

Once more, a wave of water blades closed in on me one after another in rapid succession. I poured my energy into the Impressed Seal on my back, activating my dragon magic, and let it course from my back to my arms and down to my Mana Blade. With a powerful horizontal swing, I carved through the entire oncoming volley in a single stroke.

"Water Lance!"

Perhaps having surmised that I would deflect his last attack, Allie let forth a new one—a huge spear of water approaching fast. It would be impossible to deflect this one while moving. I

concentrated the energy that I had used to break through the last volley into a single point.

"Hah!"

Letting out a gasp, I sliced that incoming spear clean in half with my Mana Blade, leaving Allie's attack to disintegrate into an airborne pool of water.

But his pursuit didn't end there. The scattering water shifted inexplicably, wrapping around me as it morphed into a round cage. The resulting prison quivered constantly, expanding and contracting at irregular intervals.

I'll need a longer blade if I'm going to break through this…

Just as I began to pour my magical energy into my Mana Blade, leaving myself momentarily vulnerable, I felt a cold chill course down my skin.

"Uh-oh…!"

"Icicle Prison!"

Before I had even finished giving voice to my shock, icy thorns began to jut from the watery cage surrounding me. The net was constricting and leaving me with no room to escape. I was still occupied with pouring more energy into my Mana Blade to extend its length.

Those inevitable tendrils of water wrapped around me before beginning to freeze in place. Before I could be fully ensnared, I threw myself with all my strength through the liquid cage, concentrating more magical energy in my hands to peel off the ice clinging to me like sheets of scales.

I bounced up and down as I hit the ground. For a split second, everything went dark—and when I looked up, I realized that a huge mallet of water was bearing down on me.

"Water Hammer!"

That oversized weapon swung down toward me. With a gasp, I kicked the ground, taking off as fast as I could. That thing was too big, too unwieldy—and it had granted me an opening!

I kept low to the ground, racing to dodge the falling hammer. Without allowing my momentum to let up, I raced next straight for Allie and began to spin around, swinging my Mana Blade like the arm of a windmill.

The tip of my enchanted sword sliced across his flesh. The glow of the moonlight highlighted the fresh gash across his skin. As that afterglow faded away, blood began to spill slowly down his arm.

“Gah…!”

Tch… That was too shallow!

He must have turned his body to dodge the worst of the strike, as my attack had been aimed for his chest, yet it had ended up leaving only a gash down his arm. Unable to cancel my momentum, I slipped past him, my defensive posture faltering. Rather than turning against the flow, I thrust my Mana Blade into the ground and raised my head.

Allie was holding his arm, but the blood that had been flowing from it had stopped. The wound was congealing rapidly.

Healing magic…? No. Is he combining it with a vampire’s natural regenerative abilities? But if he can close a wound like that so quickly…

“This is going to be more trouble than I thought,” I muttered under my breath.

“Icicle Lance!”

Now that he had sealed the wound on his arm, Allie stepped backward and struck out with an icy spear at my extended Mana Blade. Following through, he advanced toward me and lashed out once more. I closed the distance between us without hesitation.

He raised his wounded arm into the air, the blood that had congealed over the injury shimmering as a spear of bloodstained water came into being in his hands. The moment it solidified, he lunged right for me.

I dodged the attack by the skin of my teeth, watching as it carved through several strands of my hair. I paid them no heed, dropping low and pressing forward until I was within arm’s reach of my brother, before lashing out with a powerful kick.

“I…win…!” I grunted.

But my strike met with resistance. He must have hardened his body somehow. Allie wasn’t exactly unharmed, but the attack hadn’t been as effective as I had hoped. This had to be the result of a strengthening technique, I thought at first—but no, perhaps it was one of those physical changes that occurred upon becoming a vampire.

I knew fighting a vampire would be tough, but this is something else…!

As a species, vampires were built for survival. Only now, faced directly with their heightened defense and regenerative abilities, did I realize just how hard it was to fight one.

Enraged that I had gotten so close to him, Allie lashed out with

a kick of his own. I crossed my arms to protect myself, and then I jumped backward to put some distance between us. As I shook my arms, reeling and almost numb from the force of his kick, I turned back to face him.

He was pointing at me with an outstretched arm. A water-based projectile came into being around his finger.

"Water Bullet!"

I used my Mana Blade to deflect the oncoming projectiles—when I sensed even more danger.

I tilted my head to one side to avoid another water bullet and heard something that was nothing like water rushing past me. It sounded heavy. Sweat began to bead down my face.

What…? That must be more than water… Did he put something in it?

Glancing carefully over my shoulder, I realized that there was a considerable amount of debris gathered around where those water bullets had ended up. I would have been in real trouble if I had tried to cut through those projectiles with my Mana Blade, even at a distance.

"You only have your magical tools at your disposal, Sister. They're your biggest weakness. I know full well how vulnerable your Mana Blade is to physical shock."

"So that attack just now was meant to counter me? You've still got a lot to learn, Allie."

"Let's see about that."

I was trying to act strong, but there was no denying that my brother was actively exploiting a major weakness of mine. I was still wrestling with how to deal with this new development when Allie raised his arms into the air.

I glanced up in alarm. Countless icy pellets formed overhead. They were all fist-sized, shaped like sharp pyramids, and just waiting to rain down from the sky.

"Icicle Rain!"

A hail of frozen projectiles crashed down from above at Allie's command. There was no way that I would be able to block them with my Mana Blade, and I wouldn't be able to respond with a strike of my own, either.

There wasn't time to run to safety, and if I tried to carelessly fall back, Allie would come after me. Retreating would be unwise.

Then what am I supposed to do?!

I could use the Impressed Seal on my back to summon up the magical abilities of a dragon—so I should, in principle, be able to draw on the same strategy that a dragon might use in this situation.

That all-powerful flash of light that had filled me with terror during my battle with the dragon repeated in the back of my mind. It didn't have to be as strong as that attack, but if I could do something similar, over a wider area…

"—!"

As I exhaled, a great shockwave—a dragon's roar—blasted out.

The hail of icy projectiles falling toward me was crushed in midair, leaving only a fine mist to wash over me.

With the glittering droplets shining in the moonlight, Allie and I faced off against one another.

"…Terrifying," I heard him mutter under his breath.

His eyes were locked on me—that crimson color was still so unfamiliar.

Various emotions flashed through them—each as intense as the next. He was staring at me as if I were a madwoman.

"It's ironic. You possess so much power, yet people feel nothing more for you than fear. You'll be ridiculed as a heretic. They'll never recognize your true value."

"…I know what it's like to be a heretic better than anyone."

"What's the point of playing along? What's the point of recognizing what you are and being unable to change it? Just what exactly do you want so badly? Answer me, Anisphia Wynn Palettia!" Allie cried out. Desperation, rage, and so much more made his voice shake.

There was anger. There was hatred. From his cries, I knew he would never forgive me. I found myself wondering—had I burdened him with all these negative emotions?

…It hurt to even consider the possibility. I bit my lip. My heart was aching, but adding physical pain helped me anchor myself.

"I'm *me*. I can't be anything else. I'm just someone who yearns for magic, that's all."

"Ah, yes. I'm well aware of that."

"…Allie."

"Then I'm left with no choice. If I don't do this, *I'll* never be able to be *me*, either. I won't be a cog in the machine—I'm more than that! That role could be filled by anyone! So where am I…?! I wasn't brought into this world to be a nobody!"

“Even if it brings you the happiness you’ve always wished for?”

“What happiness?! To be a vapid doll, an empty king who exists only to maintain peace and harmony?! What’s the point of being king if who I am doesn’t matter?! How does that help the people?! The nobility?! The realm?! I’d just be a living sacrifice!”

Allie’s screams came from the heart, his deepest wounds exposed. For the first time in as long as I could remember, it felt like I had finally found the real him.

Until now, there had always been a sense of discomfort separating us. Even when I spoke to him directly, it would feel as though we weren’t occupying the same place. It was like we weren’t even in each other’s line of sight. And now, that barricade had finally come down.

But that was exactly why I had to reject what he was doing.

“Just what are you going on about?” I demanded.

“Huh…?”

“The throne, the royal family, all of it—they’re symbols. As they should be. No one really wants to know those symbols as people—and even if they did, they would want those people to be brilliant and captivating. Our normal, everyday feelings only get in the way. Weren’t you taught that?”

“Indeed I was. They always said that was what it took to be king! What about you, then?! Always doing whatever you want while everyone went around wishing you could wield magic… If being able to captivate others is what it takes to be a happy king, then are you saying I never had a right to be happy?!”

I wanted to avert my gaze as Allie yelled—yet I couldn’t look away.

In fact, I probably should have faced him about all this sooner. But I had closed my eyes to him and blocked my ears. I had found a place that was convenient for me in my villa at the detached palace and withdrawn from political affairs.

I had fled. I knew better than anyone that what I was doing was tantamount to heresy. But even so, I couldn’t give up on magic. Reality was just too suffocating. I knew that if I was to pursue what I wanted, it would cause great upheavals in the wider world… And yet I couldn’t stop.

And then someone else’s fate was overturned because of me—my brother, Allie. My breath was shaky as I took in the full reality of it.

I faced him once again. "…If we were regular royals, we wouldn't have even thought about all that, would we? Where did we go wrong? What were our mistakes, Allie?"

"Everything. It's all wrong—this country and us being born in it. And yet…can we just give up? If this is what I was born to do, I'll destroy it! Not just this country—the whole world!"

"…You're an idiot, Allie. Such an idiot…"

Why had everything come to this? Ah, maybe I was to blame? But I had to say it. After all, he had been blessed with so much more than I had.

"Your mistake, Allie, was that you didn't enjoy the life you had been given."

"What…?"

"You can start enjoying life right now. It's because you've managed to convince yourself that your life is so tedious that it's ended up that way. Why not change that? You don't need to revolutionize the world because of a pent-up grudge. Your hatred doesn't need to consume you. I mean, look at me. I might not be able to use magic myself, but I still think it's such a precious thing."

That belief in my heart would remain unshaken, no matter how often it was denied.

"I still believe in magic. I'll still pursue it. I always have. That's enough to bring me happiness."

"Why should I change if the world won't? Why do you want to just go along with it all no matter how much people see you as abnormal?" Allie asked, glaring at me with his teeth bared.

I averted my eyes. No matter how many times someone asked me that question, my answer would always be the same.

"I mean…it's who I am."

Allie's face contorted at my response, his expression filled with rage and anger. "Always with the non-answers! I hate that about you! I hate *you*…! I abhor you with everything that I am! I despise you! Do you know how much suffering your arrogance has caused me?! You've never even tried to understand the consequences of your actions, so you must be very happy indeed!"

The spear of blood that Allie was clutching in his hands seethed, transforming into a black, hateful thing in response to his anger. It had transformed to match all the pain and suffering in his mind.

"I—I need to overcome you! If I can't change that, I'll never be

able to move on!" he bellowed.

"…Let me say just one more thing, Allie," I said quietly. The words that came next were calm and measured. "If that's how it is, you should find joy in it. You've been living a life you didn't want. If you think that's my fault, I won't tell you otherwise. But if that's the life you have now, find something in it to enjoy. This is what you've always wanted, right? To surpass me, to stand up against me, to dominate the kingdom by force of arms? In that case…I'll keep you company until you've had enough."

I'm sorry, I wanted to say, but I couldn't form the words. *You've endured so much.* But I knew that my thoughts wouldn't reach him. All that I could do was take it all onto myself. Because no matter how much he needed it, Allie's wish could never be allowed to come true.

I couldn't let him break this country under a rule of brute force.

"I'll keep you company until you're too exhausted to go on… and then I'll defeat you. Give me everything you've got. Throw it all against me. Once you've done that, I'll tell you, 'You couldn't possibly beat me, you dolt!'"

You really are a fool, Allie. But so am I. If this situation hadn't reached this point, I might never have realized. At least let me express a single wish for you.

"You need to laugh more, get angry more often, let yourself know sadness, and most importantly, have fun. So keep coming at me until you believe you've reached the high point of your life. And then, I'll smash it all to pieces. I am Anisphia Wynn Palettia, a royal misfit, a helpless, crazy, peculiar princess! That's who I am! And as a member of the royal family, I will stop your madness!"

"You really are conceited! That's why I'll surpass you! I've always had nothing! If all you've got is your heresy, if you try to get in my way, I'll break right past you! Was it all for this?! Only results can save us now! Sister… Anisphia Wynn Palettia! Let's settle this here and now! Let's see which of us is more worthy to rule this kingdom!"

"…And yet neither of us even wants the throne. What a waste we both are." I couldn't help but let out a chuckle. We really were fools. As we both were now, I could hardly bear to show my face to our parents.

Little by little, the emotions that I had kept locked away in the depths of my heart rose to the surface—sadness, frustration, even

anger. In the end, Allie and I were cut from the same cloth.

Our emotions overlapped like tuning forks resonating in harmony. If we didn't acknowledge each other, if we didn't hold warmth in our hearts for one another, we would be left with no choice but to deny each other entirely. Even without exchanging words, our eyes, our personalities and bearings, were enough to convey that to us both.

To be honest, I felt weighted down. My mind, unusually cool, kept turning over why we had to engage in such a fruitless contest as now seemed inevitable. There was no logical way to settle this anymore. No matter how pointless, this stagnant emotional reckoning would have no clean conclusion.

"So this really is going to end in a fight," I murmured.

"…Hah. I see. How strange."

"The scale will be out of this world. But in the end, it will still be just a fight. A fight between you and me. Ah, come to think of it, we've never really fought before, have we?"

"…Oh, really now?"

"Yes. I mean, Allie—you were always such a good kid."

I'm sorry. I should have known. You were such an honest, hardworking boy. Oh, Allie, that's why it's come to this, isn't it? That's why I can't let you do this. That's why you can't see yourself becoming king with me around.

"…And ever since that day, you've always been so arrogant, so blindly determined…," I said.

"…?" Allie looked away ever so slightly. But for the briefest of moments, our eyes had met.

Watching him ready himself, I similarly adopted a fighting stance.

"Come, Allie. I'll take everything you've got, and I'll reject it all."

"And I'll force the world to change, Sister. I'll prove to you that you can't always forge on ahead without a care."

"I'll make you regret this! I'll make you cry so hard, you'll rue ever having been so stupid as to challenge me!"

"You'll be the one brought to tears, Sister! You heard me! You can call me stupid, but I'll reject your arrogance and conceit!"

"Ah, that's right. In that case, I'll be as arrogant as you think I am! And I'll bring you back to the light, Allie! So give me it all! Your resentments, your hatred, your sorrows, your frustration—

everything!"

"…A—" he began, his voice weak before roaring, "… Anisphiaaaaa!"

Allie came at me with the most furious expression that I had ever seen—and I stepped forward to meet him. That first step was immensely heavy, yet I forced myself to shake off my unease as I kicked the ground running.

Maybe I had poured too much energy into my fighting stance, or perhaps I had failed to fully suppress my emotions, but a single tear streaked down my cheek.

* * *

If I could do this over again, would I be able to avoid all the stupid mistakes that I've made? I thought as I listened to Lady Anis and Prince Algard. Before I knew it, I was biting my lip so hard that I had drawn blood.

But now wasn't the time for me to rue my failures. The healing magic that I had used on Lainie was having no more effect than water poured into a bottomless bowl. Nonetheless, I couldn't give up.

If I let Lainie die, I wouldn't be able to show my face to anyone ever again, so I continued to focus every ounce of my attention into healing her with a drive bordering on obsession. All the same, her wounds showed no sign of closing. My cheeks were clammy from exhaustion.

Lainie reached out to me, grabbing hold of the hand that I was using to cast my restorative magic. She had barely been holding on to consciousness, but now she observed me steadily as she choked on a mouthful of blood.

"Eu…phyl…li…a…"

"Don't talk!"

"…You…heard…didn't…you…?" Perhaps not having made out my warning, she coughed out her words syllable by syllable. "I… under…stand… Lady…Anis…and…Prince…Algard…"

"You understand them…?"

"They…can't…give…up… I know…what that's…like… No matter…how painful… Not even…being able…to scream…"

"…Scream?"

Did the argument between Lady Anis and Prince Algard reach Lainie? I couldn't follow her meaning. It was clear, however, that they were both suffering, and that it was because of their pain that they were now engaged in combat.

A little voice inside me was blaming me for having allowed the situation to reach this point. Once more, I bit my lip in frustration. Lainie gently touched my cheek.

"…Ngh… E-Euphyllia…! Please…"

"Lainie? Please *what*?"

"With magical energy…in your blood…you can…regenerate… magicite…"

All of a sudden, I spotted a ray of hope in her intermittent words.

She had said that it was possible to regenerate magicite. Perhaps what she needed was to drink blood imbued with magical energy?

"Hold on, let me just get ready…"

Just as I was wondering how best to offer her what she needed, Ilia, holding Lainie's other hand in her own, spoke up. "No, Lady Euphyllia. I'll do it." She brought her face close to Lainie's. "Excuse me, Miss Lainie."

"Ilia… Ngh?!"

With no further warning, Ilia bit her own lip. As blood ran down her face, she placed her lips against Lainie's.

Lainie opened her eyes in surprise for a brief moment, before letting them drift shut, placing a hand on Ilia's back. She shuddered, as though holding back some great pain, when all of a sudden *something* began to glimmer deep inside the wound in her chest.

What followed next was nothing if not dramatic. Lainie's flesh began to fill in, the skin returning to its original state as though the wound had never even existed. My jaw went slack as I watched the incredible speed of her regeneration; my concentration faltered so badly that I inadvertently stopped casting my healing magic.

"…Ngh… Agh…!"

"Lainie?!"

"It…hurts…! It's…regenerated…but…the pain…! Why…? You have to help…Prince Algard… Argh! It hurts, it hurts…!"

Lainie clutched her chest, writhing and shaking so hard that even Ilia fell back.

Did this mean that even if the wound was healed, the pain hadn't gone away? Perhaps Prince Algard was also in extreme pain despite his apparent regeneration…

Ilia wrapped her arms around Lainie, trying to calm her down in the midst of her agony.

I began to cast a fresh wave of healing magic on her when Lainie grabbed my hand, her breath labored. "…It's no good, Lady Euphyllia… Don't waste…your energy…"

"But, Lainie—"

"You, too, Lady Euphyllia…!"

"What…?"

"You don't need to keep holding back… I'll be all right…" Perhaps because of the intensity of the pain, she could say no more. Her breathing was ragged, and she soon leaned her head against Ilia.

I turned over her words in my head, asking myself, …*Am I holding back? But what exactly am I enduring?*

I knelt there stunned, unable to comprehend why she had said that.

Ilia spoke this time. "…Don't you want to stop them, Lady Euphyllia?" She was still holding Lainie in worry. "…I have neither the right nor the ability to stop them. I don't have the words, either. All I can do is watch from a distance."

"…Ilia."

"This might not be for me to say…but sometimes, it's important to follow your heart. I'll watch over Miss Lainie, so, Lady Euphyllia…"

Follow my heart? But what was my heart telling me to do? Was I really holding back like Lainie had said? To tell the truth, my feelings were much like Ilia's.

Watching those two entangling with each other, knowing how they both felt, how could I say that I wanted them both to stop when I was the reason they were fighting in the first place?

As those doubts raced through my mind, a disquieting sound began to echo through the air—an inorganic noise, as though *something* had just been shattered.

I didn't think it possible, but when I turned my gaze in its direction, what I saw was Lady Anis's Mana Blade, smashed into a million shards flying through the air.

"…Lady Anis!"

* * *

My Mana Blade—it had just been crushed. I was carrying two on me, and with the first destroyed, I leaped back to put some distance between Allie and myself.

Not having any effective long-range attacks of my own, I didn't like falling back so far from my opponent, but this time, I had no choice. I had already lost one of my means of defending myself. One Mana Blade alone wouldn't be enough to block all of Allie's strikes.

Allie deftly lashed out with his water whip. He must have realized that attacks over a large area, even if effective at limiting my movements, wouldn't be able to deliver a decisive blow, and so he had switched to this strategy.

It really was a nuisance. It was filled with ice and debris, delivering a powerful, freezing shock whenever it made contact—and it was particularly effective against my Mana Blade.

"Ha! Ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I broke it! It's shattered! How does it feel to have your most prized weapon destroyed?! Without your magical tools, your power is as good as halved!"

"Tch!"

He could mouth off all he wanted, but I couldn't deny that what he was saying was true.

In any event, the situation was dire. At this rate, I would be in serious trouble. I couldn't handle Allie's attacks with a single Mana Blade. And if I continued to hold back at a distance, I would be sure to lose.

"This is what it feels like, Sister!" Allie cried out.

There was a triumphant edge to his voice, but he was still screaming with rage, not yet fully satisfied.

"Is that all you've got?! Is that everything?! You had better be kidding me! What are you waiting for?! I wish you were dead! You told me to give all my feelings to you! You said you would reject everything I had! You said you would save me, and look at you now! This is what you get for your arrogance! Look at me, Sister! You don't even deserve to stand before me!"

I bit my lip as Allie's cries washed over me. It was clear he meant to kill me. His whole being was emanating murderous rage.

Face me! Recognize my strength! That wish was the root of all

this conflict, why we stood now on the same battlefield, and why he had chosen the path of heresy, too.

He had done it all to show the world who he was as a person. He was more than the prince.

I had turned my eyes away from him all this time. I had always assumed that his fate was none of my business, that there was nothing that I could do for him. I had given up my own right to succeed to the throne, but I had thought my actions were for his own good.

It was hard to accept that I'd been wrong. After all, even if he despised me for everything, he was still my little brother. My precious little brother, whom I had doted on and taken with me on my adventures as a child.

"A-aaaaahhhhh!"

With a cry, I jumped to dodge the oncoming water whip. Rushing toward him, I slammed my clenched fist into his cheek.

You want me to put it all back together, don't you? I get it, Allie. I know what you need. That's why you're fighting this hard.

He was fighting to the death because he meant to end his own life, too.

And now here we were. I refused to accept his wish, though. There was still a place in my heart for him.

Yet I knew that the love I had for him was the greatest insult of all to him. I understood that—really, I did.

If fighting him like this was the only way that I could get him to accept how I felt, the only way that I could save him…then I was ready.

It wasn't as though I had never killed before. Adventurers sometimes found themselves in situations where they were forced to take a life. But I wanted to spare as many people as possible. Call me naive, but that was one principle that I wouldn't give up.

Besides, I had slayed countless monsters before. I had no reason to hesitate when it came to taking life. I just had to be prepared for it. After all, I didn't want to end up hurting myself in the process.

I would face him with my whole being.

"You really are a fool of a brother!"

I focused the magical energy circulating inside me into the Impressed Seal on my back—not to unleash dragon magic, but to blend my own with those dragon powers. I began to take in that magic and absorb it into my own body instead of casting it around

myself like I had done before.

The aura surrounding me increased in density, transforming until it distinctly resembled the horns of a dragon. Heat coursed through my flesh, a fever that scorched me from head to toe.

The curse of the dragon's magical energy surged through me, eating away at my being. That level of power couldn't be contained in human flesh, and it felt as though my body might burst apart at any moment. Even so, I refused to let go of the reins exuding that tremendous force.

Feed on me, consume my magical energy, my very being. Rampage to your heart's content. Then, reverberating in the back of my mind, I heard a dragon's roar.

"Aerial System: Dragon Heart!"

Direct control over the dragon magic that I had taken in—this was my hidden ace.

With all my strength, I poured the raging magical energy of the dragon into my remaining Mana Blade. I could hear the weapon creaking under the pressure of all that power.

But I didn't stop. If I wasn't willing to give this everything I had, I wouldn't stand a chance against Allie, so I had to do everything in my power even if it meant destroying the weapon in the process.

"Aaaaarrrrrgggggghhhhh!"

I prepared to unleash the same light-based slash technique that had cut through the dragon's breath. My magical sword, infused with an excessive amount of power, was now shaped more like a claw than a blade.

Allie tried to block the blow by summoning one water-based shield after another, hoping to drown it out. One, two, three, four—his barriers were succeeding in blocking my slashes, but I wasn't about to relent.

Five, six, seven, eight—and in the blink of an eye, I carved straight through the final water shield.

A gaping wound ran diagonally across his chest. Just as before, blood spurted out, only for the flesh to rapidly regenerate and scab over the injury.

"I'm not…finished! I—I…!"

Allie's legs were trembling. He was clearly having a hard time staying on his feet, but he was still managing to stand.

Uh-oh. At this rate, he wouldn't fall back.

The Mana Blade shattered with an audible crack. Now, I wouldn't be able to respond to any of his attacks. I would have to settle this before he had a chance to counter.

But if he won't stop…

…I would have no choice but to kill him.

I aimed straight for his heart, where he had plunged the piece of magicite that he had taken from Lainie. Stepping forward, the force powerful enough to leave a gash in the ground, I headed toward him. As the distance between us rapidly closed, Allie's face became clearer.

"This is it! It's over!"

His features were contorted in anguish. He was glaring my way, all of his raging emotions directed at me.

Just one step farther, and I would be able to reach him—and at that moment, his expression softened.

…Why is he looking at me like that?

Why was he smiling, seemingly so at peace? No, I hadn't expected this at all. I mean, he hated me—so much so that he wanted to kill me. He should have resented losing to me, so why, *why* did he seem happy?

My strike had almost reached its target. My thoughts continued to flow one after the other, practically in slow motion. Although I questioned his reaction, I hadn't stopped moving. My finger was aimed straight at his heart.

And so my dragon's claw, formed from pure aura, neared his chest. I was about to tear into him. This was clearly the end. I closed my eyes. I couldn't fathom his expression. I had to avert my eyes from what I was about to do.

Yet what my hand met wasn't the softness of human flesh, but a sensation as hard as iron.

"Huh…?"

The unexpected resistance knocked me flat on my back. Panicked, I glanced up, only to see a wave of silver hair fluttering down before me.

It was Euphie. The impact had thrown her to the ground with tremendous force, and she was lying now just a short distance away from Allie. Only then did I realize something spinning through the air, landing in the space between us.

The Arc-en-Ciel. The second it hit the ground, it snapped in half, pronouncing that its job was done. I stared across at the scene dumbfounded. What was *she* doing here?

The first thing that reached me was her voice. She stared across at me as she lifted herself to her feet with trembling hands, tears spilling from her eyes. But she wasn't crying—rather, she seemed furious.

"…Ah! What do you think you're doing?! Do you mean to kill each other?! You fools, both of you! You've left me with no choice! I'll stop you both myself! As your vassal and as your former betrothed!"

Her pained cry finally brought me back to reality.

"…Euphie…"

"Look at your faces! Neither of you really wants to fight…! You don't *really* want to hurt each other! So why are you torturing yourselves?! Look what you're doing! Why do you both have to be such idiots?!" Euphie cried out with a ragged voice.

That was enough to sap my remaining strength. All at once, my whole body was struck with exhaustion.

She was right—if she hadn't stopped me, I would have killed Allie. She had been the one to bring me to my senses. I didn't know how to respond.

But this contest wasn't over yet. I pulled my shivering body up from the ground. The remaining dragon magic was gone, and my body was reeling now that the Impressed Seal had worn off. It looked like it wasn't possible to directly absorb the powers of a being as incredible as a dragon.

All the same, I couldn't stop here. Dragging myself, I approached Allie's side.

He was staring up at the sky, his arms and legs spread out in a star. Even when I drew near, he didn't try to rise to his feet.

"…Allie," I called out. He didn't turn my way, merely continuing to stare upward into the distant sky. Still sprawled on

the ground, he said with a soft voice, "…It's a nice day."

"…Huh?"

"All those days I lived as a prince, I felt nothing. No joy, no anger, no sorrow, no pleasure. I was supposed to stand at the head of the country as a leader. There was never any need for personal feelings, to be myself. I knew better than anyone how limited my own talents were, so I dragged everyone around me down, too…"

Piece by piece, he began to unburden himself. The raging storm of emotion had subsided. The voice sounding in my ears had reached a level that one could even call calm.

"I thought I could go on like that… But I was simply ignoring reality. It was Lainie who made me realize all this. The goodwill, the prayers, the wishes that people felt for her through her innate charm. I knew those feelings. I had always been trying to forget them."

"Allie…?"

"…The weather was so nice that I had to look up—and I knew only one person who could have been up there in the sky."

…I could hardly keep my eyes open. How easy it would be to fall to the ground here and now. I bit my lip, fighting to keep my thoughts from spilling out.

"…Do you remember, Sister?"

"…Remember what?"

"That day our father took us both out, and we slipped away from the mansion?"

"…I do."

That event had taken place long ago, back when I was still allowed to lead Allie by the hand. I took him with me that day. We went outside to search for spirit stones and to have a little adventure together.

Back then, Allie had been a passive and unassertive child. He used to follow me wherever I led. I wanted to make him smile, so I took him out with me often. That outing should have been like all the others.

"That was when the monster attacked. You stayed behind so I could escape. With the sun setting around me, I did my best to hide so that no one would find me. I was alone, fighting to silence my panicked breath. I had to know whether you were safe, but no matter how many times I tried to get up, I couldn't move. And then you found me."

"…Yes."

"…You always led me by the hand. You taught me so much. Until that day, I always saw you as a decent person… Until you pushed me away."

…He was right. I *had* pushed him away. After that day, our relationship changed dramatically.

I had used spirit stones to buy time for him to escape. A knight sensed that something was amiss and had come to my aid. But then try as I might, I couldn't find Allie anywhere. I was terrified by the thought that he might have been attacked by another monster.

When finally I found him, my heart overflowed with relief. I was overjoyed to know that he was safe. Yet from that day on, rumors began to circulate.

People said that I had tried to murder Allie out of jealousy.

I already knew that I couldn't use magic. That was why I had started researching spirit stones and why I had involved him in my efforts so many times.

Now that I had produced tangible results in the form of my magical tools, people were no longer as outwardly critical of me as they had been back then. Yet at the time, they had been merciless.

"Princess Anisphia resents Prince Algard for his magical talent."

"No doubt she was only playing innocent and meant to take his life. You've seen how sly she is."

"Her intentions are obvious. Killing Prince Algard would guarantee her the throne."

I first caught wind of those rumors when I had been on my way to visit Allie. They were as false as they were confusing.

I had never resented my brother. I had never wanted to kill him. However, we were both royalty. We both had to understand our respective positions so that the security of the throne could be guaranteed.

That led to my decision to renounce my claim to succeed my father. I argued my parents into submission, doing everything I could to convince them that I had no desire to become queen. I made sure they knew I meant no harm to Allie.

I resolved to keep my distance from him, and when finally the rumors died down, I grinned at him and said, "Now you'll be king

one day! There's nothing to worry about!"

And yet…Allie was furious. I couldn't comprehend why he was so angry. All I could do was watch, stunned, as he turned his back on me, his body trembling with rage.

After that, Allie and I grew distant. He began to ignore me—and before I knew it, we were avoiding each other.

Naturally, our relationship never improved. I had accepted that. I wouldn't act like a loving sister if it meant only causing trouble for him. I just wanted the country to be in safe hands. I always told myself that he was the king that everyone wanted.

"…People were always whispering to me, 'Don't let Princess Anisphia beat you. She's jealous of you; she'll never stop hating who you are. She's possessed by a demon. If you think of her as your sister, she'll come for you when you least expect it,'" Allie said. He clenched his fists so hard that I winced in pain just from watching.

I wanted to demand to know who had spoken about me like that. Such thoughts had never, *ever* crossed my mind. The very idea was an insult. If people were going to disparage me, they could at least do it to my face. To think that someone had been spreading such malicious lies…

"Not someone—everyone. At the very least, no one around me ever spoke up for you. All they ever did was ridicule you, and they told me to do the same, so I turned a blind eye. So long as I didn't get involved with you, there would be no trouble. I didn't need a sister to be king."

…What was I supposed to say to all this? What words would fill the void?

It's all right, Allie. I understand.

"…Hey, Anis?"

"…What?"

"Why did you give up your right to the throne? How can someone who is so much smarter than me not be suitable to rule as queen? I don't know what the point of being king is anymore…"

Those mournful words were the most painful blow that I had received all day. I was reeling from guilt and regret—I practically wished that I could die.

And still I couldn't comfort my brother. After all, none of this changed the fact that he should still become king. At the very least, that was the better option here in the Kingdom of Palettia.

"…I'm a heretic, you know? There's no way a princess who can't use magic could ever rule this kingdom. Just look at our history—it would be inconceivable. So you're the better choice, both as a prince and as a king."

No matter how impatient I was, no matter how much I might want the throne, I lacked one of the most important qualities—the magical talent that I still hadn't given up on pursuing.

"I can't use magic. That alone makes me unsuitable," I reiterated.

"Are you saying I'm suitable solely on the basis of my blood, my position, and my magic…? I don't think so," he said firmly. When he continued, his voice was filled with resignation. "I would have been a king who simply did as he was told. The country would have been quiet, peaceful, and calm because I would have had Euphyllia by my side…"

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched Euphyllia quiver as Allie whispered her name. It was certainly true that the two of them would have been stable rulers. But from Allie's perspective, they wouldn't have been any more than that. That was why he hadn't approved of her.

He was essentially saying that the realm couldn't by ruled through peace and stability alone.

"How does having skill at magic help rule a country? Or is there some other point to it? It's all well and good to celebrate magic, but why do you need it in a *king*? Yes, I'm sure Euphyllia and I would have ruled exactly as we were both told. But certain things would still have been beyond us. I wouldn't have had the power or skill to change anything… Maybe Euphyllia would have lent me her ear…"

"That's…," Euphie began, before hesitating.

I knew what I had to say. "If you had confided in her, she would have understood. You would have been able to think about your futures together."

"…Hmm. Then maybe I didn't have enough respect for someone who would have been my loyal vassal…," Allie murmured under his breath.

It was painful just looking at his self-deprecating smile.

"Sister, maybe you should be queen. I've often thought so."

"…Why?"

"Because you listen to the people. You lend them your ear. You

help fix their problems. You even offer a helping hand to the nobility. What can you call that if not transformative? If you could put your wisdom to use for the realm, what more could the people want in a ruler?"

I could say nothing in response. I couldn't even bring myself to deny his suggestion.

"…The problem is, the country hasn't accepted you. I don't mean the people—I'm talking about the realm. The powers that be who run everything from the shadows will never acknowledge you. A country that rejects improvement, clinging only to tradition and its past glories, has no future… So what's left but to destroy it?"

"…Did you do all this because of me?" Was this because I had embarked on the new path of magicology? Because I had produced tangible accomplishments in the form of my magical tools? Had Allie decided that he had to destroy the status quo for my sake?

He said nothing to answer my question, merely continuing to watch the sky. "…It's beyond me. You're the real genius, the one who truly cares about the people, the one with all the right qualifications… Not me…"

Allie lifted his hand to his face, covering his eyes. His lips trembled. Finally, his voice hoarse, he whispered, "I wish I had never been born…"

"…Allie…"

"Because of me, you've had to suffer so much… If my existence has caused you pain…I wish I had never been born…!"

Tears were flowing down his cheeks. Everything was growing blurry in my own vision, too. Before I knew it, I couldn't see at all. My eyes were burning, and if I hadn't bitten down on my lip, I would have started sobbing aloud.

"Sister… It's hard…not being able to be who you want to be…"

…Life brought with it so many regrets. All the same, no one could go back in time. The only option was to keep pushing forward with the pain.

As Allie continued to weep, I couldn't say anything to comfort him, nor could I reach out. All that I could do was sit there like a speechless fool.

"…What am I supposed to make of this?" my father intoned gravely.

The atmosphere in the room had never felt heavier. No one knew what to say.

After attacking the detached palace and taking Lainie's magicite, Allie had now been detained. I had also collapsed after I pushed myself too hard with my Impressed Seal, and then there was the incident with Tilty, who had gone on a complete rampage in the lecture hall. All in all, the royal palace had descended into utter chaos.

Miraculously, the situation had now been resolved, although Tilty had been arrested after attacking people indiscriminately while cackling like a madwoman. She had been subdued by a group of knights from the Royal Guard who had hurried to the scene. They were keeping her in isolation until the effects of her extensive magic use wore off.

Given the nature of the incident, a great many others had been placed under arrest, too. Moritz, who had betrayed his involvement in Allie's plot during his rant in the lecture hall, along with his father, Count Chartreuse, were among them, both now sitting in jail.

My father had hurried to hush up what had happened, ordering everyone to keep silent—and so for the time being, calm had returned to the royal palace.

As such, we had all been summoned to explain what had happened. To be honest, I was having a hard time just standing on my feet, so Ilia carried me in her arms. For some reason, Lainie, who should have been the most seriously injured, was the sprightliest among us.

Allie was brought into the room in shackles and pressed to explain his actions. After our fight, he had fallen strangely silent, offering no resistance. He simply recounted what had happened in an eerily matter-of-fact way.

"…Algard," our father began.

"Yes."

“Why on earth would you do something so stupid…?” He sounded dejected.

My mother, sitting beside him, was so ephemeral that I couldn’t help but wonder where her usual dignified poise had vanished to. Duke Grantz was probably the calmest of everyone in the room and was quietly watching Allie from a distance.

“You’re saying you kept Lainie close so you could make use of her vampire powers for yourself? Not only that, but you also tried to remove Euphyllia from the picture and failed due to Anis’s interference? And when Anis placed Lainie under her protection as a last resort, you decided to become a vampire yourself as your plan to rule the country…?” my father asked.

“Yes,” Allie answered.

“Why would you even think of something so blisteringly mad?! Where did you come up with such a boneheaded idea?!” our father bellowed.

“…I have no excuse. I was stupid, that’s all.” Allie stared down at his feet. He had no desire to elaborate on what really lay behind his actions.

My father breathed a resigned sigh and shook his head. The furrow between his eyebrows was probably carved into his face by this point.

He addressed me next. “…Anis. Is it possible to turn a vampire back into a regular person?”

“…No, I don’t think so. In fact, even after having the magicite torn out of her body, Lainie was still able to regenerate. Even if we could remove the vampire magicite, I don’t think we would be able to turn Allie back.”

“And vampire magicite is inherited by one’s children, too… Do I understand that correctly?” My father asked this question dispassionately.

I also tried to keep my emotions at bay. “Yes, it does seem that way.”

At this response, my father turned his gaze up to the ceiling. “Algard… Do you care to explain?”

“No. It’s as Anis says.”

“…Then you leave me with no choice but to disown you. We can’t allow vampirism to taint the royal line. I can’t allow you to succeed to the throne.”

Allie hung his head as my father pushed aside his feelings as a

parent to deliver his pronouncement. There was no emotion in my brother's expression, either. He was simply hollow.

"…Vampirism is cause enough to disinherit you. But then there's that charm ability, too…"

"Father, if I may…?" I interrupted. "There's no sign that Allie can use that kind of ability."

"What?"

"He didn't become a vampire in the typical way. I don't know if it's an issue of compatibility, or if the process is incomplete, but he seems to have only acquired a vampire's regenerative abilities. I've confirmed this with Lainie."

"But who's to say they might not develop in the future…? Anis, you said there might be other vampires out there, too?"

"Yes. There must be others, like Lainie's mother. Some may have no obvious symptoms at all."

There could be vampires living in our midst now, or others like Lainie who remained unaware of what they truly were.

They could have even infiltrated the nobility or have gone to other lands. A vampire trained as an assassin or a spy would be incredibly dangerous.

"In that case, we'll have to devise countermeasures as a matter of urgency… Algard?"

"Yes, Father."

"…Do you resent me?" he asked Allie quietly.

Allie merely stared back in silence. Our father's gaze was piercing as he waited for an answer.

After a few quiet moments, Allie finally began to speak up, just as devoid of emotion as he had been a minute ago. "No, Father. If I resent anything, it's this world we live in. I've hated just about everything from the day I entered this world."

"…I see…"

"Yes… I've felt this way for a long, long time." For the first time, Allie's stoic expression faltered, giving way to the faintest of smiles, taking our father aback. "My life has been a never-ending stream of excruciating regrets. Every single meaningless day has been filled with resentment, none of it directed at anyone in particular. The days to come will be no different."

"Algard…"

"My sins are the result of a long and festering bitterness. There's been no salvation in my life thus far. I'll admit that.

Resentment was all I ever had. Grudges. Enmity." He spoke quietly, but there was an unmistakable will behind those words.

Like ashes after firewood has been exhausted, they retained their heat but were no longer aflame. Those ashes would never burn again, I realized, and my chest tightened. For Allie, something inside him had reached its end.

"It's past now. You can't send water back up the waterfall… All that's left is to let the current carry you on. I won't plead my case, and I won't ask you for a more lenient sentence. I'll accept my punishment, Father."

"…Then I exile you to the frontier, where you will spend your time as a test subject for vampire research. If you rebel again, there will be no second chances. Before they turn to dust, your flesh and blood will be put to use to protect the realm into the future. That is the opportunity for atonement that I grant to you… Do you hear, Algard?"

"Your Majesty, I'm deeply grateful for this act of generosity." Allie gave his thanks—not as a son to his father, but as a vassal to his king.

By all appearances, this would be farewell. My father must have felt the same, as I could see that he was clenching his fists so hard that his bones must have been creaking from the strain.

"…Algard…" Our mother stepped forward. Tears were spilling down her cheeks. She approached Allie, raising a hand into the air as she drew near. For a second, it looked like she might slap him on the cheek. But she held back. Her hand stalled, and after a brief pause, she patted him on the chest. "…I've failed as a parent."

"Mother…"

"Do I even deserve to be called your mother? I thought to protect this country by dedicating myself to diplomacy. In truth, I'm a fool. I failed to give my children the guidance they needed. I suppose I must have played a role in nurturing your resentments. I'm sorry… I'm sorry, Algard…"

Our mother, usually so stalwart, was in tears. As she expressed her own regrets, she didn't have that strong, confident air around her like she usually did.

"I should have been closer to you. I should have given you a good telling off rather than letting you sink into hatred and despair. I've always, always been too late to notice these things…"

She clutched at Allie's clothes, weeping with remorse. Allie

gently took her hands in his own, before crouching down to meet her at eye level.

"Mother, my sins are my own. Please don't punish yourself over me. You're beloved as the mother of the realm. It's my fault I couldn't love you as everyone else does. You're the best mother in the entire Kingdom of Palettia…and I'm sorry I failed you."

"…! You're such an unfaithful child…! Ah, and now look at the color of your eyes…!" She placed her hands on his cheeks, sobbing as she peered into his crimson eyes.

Allie stared back at her, offering no resistance.

I can't say how long they remained like that, but it was Duke Grantz who finally spoke up. "…Queen Sylphine, if I may?"

"…Yes, Grantz. I'm sorry about getting so emotional…" She withdrew her hand from Allie's face and wiped her eyes, then touched her son's cheek once more before returning to her husband's side.

My father rested a hand against her trembling back, offering his support.

Duke Grantz gave my parents a minute to themselves before turning his gaze back to Allie. "Prince Algard, could you tell us the names of everyone who was involved in this affair?"

"Of course… Thank you for everything, Duke Magenta."

"Not at all. This outcome may be in part Euphyllia's fault for not having given you the help you needed, or mine for not having taught her how to do what she ought to have. And it's the dark side of this realm that has consumed you. As such, I would like to enlist your assistance to at least begin to make amends."

"…I see. Make amends? That's an interesting way to put it." Allie forced a smile at Duke Grantz's request.

This situation was why he had broken off his betrothal to Euphyllia, so if he could come clean now, that entire affair could be brought to light. It would also help reveal the identities of those who had taken advantage of him, who had been willing to allow the kingdom to fall under the control of vampires.

With Algard's fate decided, we were asked to leave the room. There was no point staying around any longer, so we turned to make our way back to the detached palace. At that moment, however, something tugged at me from behind.

"Sister," Allie called out without warning.

I turned back to face him. His expression was as calm as it had

been a moment ago, except for his brow slowly rising in discontent; I felt a pang in my chest for the Allie I remembered from our childhood.

He was meeting my eyes, but I could sense a certain tension in him. I waited in silence for him to continue, when he reached out with one hand.

"…Do you remember?" he asked.

With that question, a door in my memory was forced open. Without giving it any further thought, I wrapped my hands around his. Ah, I had wanted to forget so much, but now the memories came flooding back.

Allie had been a quiet child, but I had managed to arouse his anger on several occasions. Once, I had caught him sulking, saying that he wouldn't help in my experiments anymore, but I had stayed by his side until I could quiet him down. In the end we had exchanged a handshake.

"…Our makeup handshake, right?" I whispered, my throat tightening, tears welling up in my eyes.

Allie was my brother. No matter how our relationship changed, no matter how far away we were, we had our memories of each other. I had hoped, from the bottom of my heart, that his life would turn out well.

But it had all been in vain. I was a useless sister. I hadn't done anything for him at all. And yet, he still held on to the memories of our time together.

He held his hand out to me in a gesture of peace. That alone filled my heart with joy.

"…I'm sorry…," I said.

I truly was. This was all my fault. If I had been able to live a normal life in this world, he would never have had to suffer like this.

But I hadn't chosen that path. Even if I could go back in time, I'm sure I would still choose magic over everything else. That was the one thing that I couldn't give up, no matter what. I would choose that road for as long as I lived.

I was a terrible sister. I'd given him nothing. I couldn't save my little brother, and that was unbearable to admit. Why did it have to end this way?

"Anis," Allie called out to me.

Through my tears, my vision gradually cleared up, and I

realized that Allie was smiling at me. He looked just like he had in the old days, happy and at peace.

"Thank you. And I'm sorry."

I wanted to say it again: *I'm sorry, Allie. My dear little brother, I failed you. I wasn't able to protect you. And for that—I'm so, so sorry.*

* * *

After Prince Algard's fate was decided, the perpetrators involved in the plot to break up our betrothal were revealed.

The conspiracy had been led by Prince Algard himself, along with Count Chartreuse. It had begun when Moritz, after learning of Lainie's secret, uncovered vampire research materials in the vault that stored all the forbidden books.

Drawing on that research, Moritz and his associates had realized that Lainie was a vampire. It seemed also that Count Chartreuse, intrigued by those vampiric powers of attraction—not to mention immortality—devised a plan to secure Prince Algard greater power and authority.

If not for Lady Anis's intervention, there could be no way of telling how the count's plan might have ended. The conspirators hadn't expected Lady Anis to come to my aid, nor to extend her protection to Lainie, too.

Count Chartreuse's greatest miscalculation was letting Lady Anis disrupt his scheme. It was ironic, really, considering that he was the director of the Ministry of the Arcane and had already long since made an enemy of her.

Navre Sprout and Saran Meckie, who had denounced me alongside Allie and Moritz, had done so with good intentions. Moritz, it seemed, had involved them to provide a distraction of sorts. As such, they weren't blameless, but their punishment was comparatively light.

Moreover, Algard's disinheritance and banishment to the frontier was publicly proclaimed. The reason given was that he had been plotting to usurp the throne, while the fact that he would become an observation subject for vampire research was kept under wraps. In addition to the researchers, His Majesty had personally selected a small number of servants and attendants to keep an eye on him.

And as the one who incited the plot and encouraged Prince Algard, Count Chartreuse was sentenced to death for high treason. The Chartreuse family was stripped of its noble titles and privileges and subject to a storm of purges that dealt out further penalties to all those relatives and associates who had been involved in the conspiracy.

As the director of the Ministry of the Arcane had plotted directly against the king, the ministry itself underwent dramatic changes. There was a period of great uncertainty without the director at its helm while deliberations were held to decide his successor.

As for myself, I couldn't exactly say that life had returned to normal at the detached palace. This was because Lady Anis, the most important person in all of this, had collapsed. Moreover, Tilty, who could have served as her doctor, also needed to recuperate—and so Lady Anis was being seen by a physician at the royal palace.

When His Majesty, King Orphans, found out about his daughter's Impressed Seal, he almost had a stroke, whereas Queen Sylphine had broken out into an amused laugh. She instructed me to let her know when Lady Anis was able to get out of bed.

Things hadn't calmed down entirely, but the chain of events that had begun with the annulment of my engagement were starting to settle down. All the same, I couldn't exactly say that I felt better about everything that had happened.

While we were all busy trying to get back to our daily lives… the day of Prince Algard's departure to the frontier arrived.

"Let's go see him off," Lainie suggested.

I hesitated at first, but I decided to join her. Lainie seemed troubled after everything that had happened. Was she perhaps worried about Prince Algard?

His departure was a lonely one, and he was leaving not through the palace's grand main entrance but in secret through the back gate.

We found several carriages lined up near the entrance, along with Prince Algard, still in shackles, gazing blankly up at the sky.

The knights serving as both guards and escorts were startled when they saw Lainie and me. Judging by their expressions, they were wondering why we might have come, but remembering their manners, they bowed to us both respectfully.

"L-Lady Euphyllia! And Lady Lainie!"

“I’m sorry for coming unannounced… May we speak to Prince Algard?”

“Huh? B-but…”

“…Sorry. I’d like to talk with them both, too,” Algard said, bowing his head to the knights, who were evidently unsure how to proceed.

He remained completely unperturbed—and that impassive look was almost intimidating.

It was that impression that surprised me most of all. Prince Algard often looked like this—and yet I had never thought of him as intimidating before. It was more than a little confusing.

“Please. We won’t be long…,” Lainie said to the knights.

“…We can’t leave him alone, but if you’re all right with that…” The lead knight insisted that he couldn’t leave his post, but nonetheless they did give us all a little bit of distance.

Bowing my head in thanks to the knights, I turned to the person whom we had come to see. “…Prince Algard.”

“Not just Lainie, but you, too… Are you her chaperone?”

“Something like that.”

“Ah.” Prince Algard let his muscles relax, his expression loosening.

My eyes opened wide in surprise. I found myself wondering whether this truly was the same man to whom I had been betrothed, when I suddenly realized something.

In truth, I didn’t know anything about him at all.

“…Prince Algard.”

While I was processing my shock, Lainie stepped forward first. Prince Algard stared straight across at her, his crimson eyes softening warmly. They were the same color as hers now.

But I couldn’t quite comprehend the complex emotions behind them.

“Allow me to apologize once more, Lainie. I don’t regret trying to use you and your powers. It was the only option available to me, but it was for my own sake, and I know I did something terrible to you. I am sorry for that, truly. I don’t mind if you want to curse me for my actions.”

Slowly, Lainie shook her head in response to this apology. She was clearly pained, and yet she managed to force a brave smile. “It’s true. What you did was awful. It hurt so much, it really did… but I’ll be all right. You were also so kind to me. I’m sure that

kindness was real."

"…Do you mean it?"

"You weren't just trying to take advantage of me. It wasn't just my charm ability pulling you in. Yes, your kindness is real, I'm sure of it. You said some harsh things, and it wasn't always easy…but I felt goodness in you, too."

I had heard that Prince Algard had often helped Lainie get used to life at the academy when she had first enrolled. Had she sensed his inner struggle from the very beginning, perhaps?

"Even so, I was always so preoccupied with myself…," Lainie continued.

"…Indeed. I was always dwelling on my own life, too," Prince Algard replied.

"Yes… So let's say we're even there. But it *did* hurt, and it won't be easy for me anymore, either, so I can't forgive you, and I resent what you did."

"…Ah, I really am sorry… And also…"

"Yes?"

"…I can't tell you how grateful I am. Thank you."

Lainie's eyes opened wide in shock, caught off guard. "…Why are you thanking *me*?"

"I was selfish…but I've had my fill. I've always carried so many regrets with me in life. It's been a long time since I've felt so at peace. I understand full well I won't be easily redeemed, though." So Prince Algard said with a wry smile—the kind of expression that only someone who had found true peace could make, "It's all thanks to you, Lainie. Meeting you finally brought me to…no, made me remember what it's like to be happy."

"…Prince Algard…"

"I can admit it now. I loved my sister. I loved her so much that I hated her for leaving me. I abandoned the world she adored and found myself hating her. Such thoughts aren't very becoming of a prince. But if I had given up, I would have been as good as dead. It's because of you that I can breathe freely again, so thank you."

Prince Algard was speaking gently. His voice rang true with the depth of his emotions. Hearing him speak this way, I realized that he was a human being no different from me.

Lainie pursed her lips and reached out to take his hand in both of hers. Then she pressed it against her forehead in a gesture of prayer.

"…Prince Algard."

"What?"

"…It hurt. It was so painful when you tore into my chest with this hand. It was agony. But you were hurting, too, weren't you? All this time, you were in pain…" Lainie repeated those words, as though comforting a child.

Prince Algard's composure finally crumbled. His expression twisted in agony before he caught himself and smiled clumsily. He closed his eyes before lifting his hands to his forehead, just as Lainie had.

They were comforting each other, praying for each other's future well-being. I felt my chest tighten just watching them. The two of them remained that way for a short while before they slowly pulled apart.

They were both smiling. Tears spilled down Lainie's face, while Prince Algard frowned in discomfort.

"…Euphyllia."

At that moment, I turned my gaze to Prince Algard as he suddenly called out my name.

"…I want you to know I'm sorry to you, too. Although you might find that hard to believe."

"No, I believe you…"

"It's all right. I'm not trying to patch things up between us… I wouldn't expect you to want to patch things up in the first place… That's why I was never satisfied with you. I respected you as a person, as a noblewoman. I wanted to like you. But as a fiancée, you were no good at all. Completely unattractive."

"…How rude. Truly."

I felt the beginnings of a smirk forming on my face. It was a weight off my chest, hearing that we weren't suited to each other. As such, my next feelings came easily.

"Prince Algard, please forgive me for what I'm about to do."

"I've already been disinherited. If anything, I'm the one who ought to know his place from now on. You can do whatever you like."

Having received his permission, I nodded once before mercilessly swinging my arm.

There was a loud slap—and when I lowered my hand, Prince Algard's cheek had turned bright red. Lainie was staring at us in shock, her eyes darting from him to me in turn.

Prince Algard staggered, raising a hand to his bruised cheek. That sight was enough to leave me feeling refreshed. The dark feeling in my heart had finally relented.

"…I—I guess that works, too…," he murmured.

"I was actually thinking of punching you, but I decided to have mercy," I answered.

"You would really punch someone in the face…? Well, I won't argue. No one could call you a fragile doll now."

"No. I'm sorry I wasn't good enough. You were the absolute worst as a fiancé, but still…maybe things would have been better between us if I had approached you as a real person."

Algard's eyes flew open in surprise. A moment passed, and he stared back at me with an expression that I had never seen before. There was a hint of emotion in his gaze—he seemed almost amused.

"…Seeing you now, I may start thinking of you as the one who got away."

"If you failed to catch me, it's your own fault."

"Well, you've reached safe waters. Just keep swimming, and you should reach the ocean one day. There's no room for me next to a great fish like you."

"…And the ocean would be too deep for you as well."

"Ha-ha-ha! No doubt!"

Prince Algard let out a hearty laugh, his smile for once befitting his age. It was enough to bring a tear to my eye.

My heart ached to see his expression. It was a complicated mix of a great many emotions, the passions that had caused him to lose his smile somewhere along the way. Maybe I held some blame in that.

If I had realized all this sooner, would I have been able to pull him back from the brink? Yet reflecting on it all now, I realized that I could never have chosen that future.

Right now, for the first time in his life, he had been freed from all bonds. If this was the real Algard, it was clear that I wasn't suited to be his fiancée.

"…Euphyllia, tell Ilia I'm sorry I hurt her. I would have liked to apologize in person, but I don't have that freedom anymore."

"…Very well."

"Ah… I guess I can't ask for any more than this."

Before I knew it, Prince Algard stepped back from me. It was only one step…but it felt as if an enormous gulf had opened

between us.

"Euphyllia?"

"Yes?"

"Look after my sister for me."

My heart seemed to skip a beat. I caught my breath at those words, peering up into Prince Algard's eyes. His expression was just as calm as it had been a moment earlier, but there was an earnestness in his voice.

With those final words, he turned his back on us and made his way to the carriage and his escorts. Watching him go, I felt as if my tongue, my whole mouth, were frozen solid.

I felt like I should say something, but no words came out. I watched him step into the carriage. The knights quietly bowed once more to Lainie and me before turning to leave.

"…Lady Euphyllia."

While I was standing there, stunned, the time had come for us to leave. The carriage carrying Prince Algard had already started to pull quietly away.

At that moment, Lainie called to me, offering me a handkerchief. "…Let's wipe your eyes."

Only then did I realize that I was crying. Prince Algard's expression as he had left remained imprinted in my mind.

What I felt for him wasn't love. It wasn't friendship, either, nor affection.

I had just seen something beautiful. Now that I had let it go, I was struck by a sense of loss.

The carriage disappeared into the far distance, whisking away a man whose whole life should have been so wonderfully beautiful.

* * *

"…I see. So Prince Algard has gone…"

"He asked me to convey his apologies to you."

"…Yes. I'm such a fool. And so is he."

After returning to the detached palace, I told Ilia that Prince Algard had wanted to apologize to her. She clearly had conflicting feelings upon hearing this.

Apparently, she had once served as a chaperone not just to Lady Anis but to the prince as well. As such, she had known him since he

had been a child, although she had become estranged from him at the same time that Lady Anis had…

After concluding our report to Ilia, Lainie and I went our separate ways. It sounded like she had set her sights on becoming a maidservant and had begun to learn the basics under Ilia's supervision. I didn't want to disturb them, and I was concerned about Lady Anis, so I made my way to her chambers…

"…Lady Anis?"

There was no reply, so I peeked through her door. It looked like she was still asleep. When I had seen her last, she had said that she was having difficulty moving around, and so she had a large pile of books and research materials stacked beside her bed.

Was she incapable of resting while awake? I approached her quietly and sat down on the edge of her bed.

She was sound asleep, her breathing steady. Was it my imagination, or was her expression still unusually pale?

"…A side effect of the Impressed Seal, maybe?"

According to Lady Anis, the adverse effects were less severe than when she used her usual ether drug. She had collapsed this time only because she had used the powers of the dragon directly rather than channeling its aura.

"…I only helped you with that because you said it was safe," I muttered.

Honestly, I was a little resentful. I had seen firsthand the consequences of her using her ether drug, so when she had said that this should be a better technique, I had helped her develop it. Now, I felt deceived… However, there could be no doubt that she had put her all into that fight, even if it meant she couldn't afford to look back.

"…But why?"

Why was she so desperate to push herself to such lengths? Why on earth had she been born unable to use regular magic?

If she *could* use magic…maybe her relationship with her brother wouldn't have broken down. They might have been the best of siblings, always able to rely on one another for support.

Maybe I would have had a place alongside them both. With how close our fathers were, as the daughter of a duke, I might have been chosen to be a friend to both of them right from childhood.

If only everything had turned out so nicely. Lady Anis might have used some reckless magic, catching me by surprise and leaving

Prince Algard to exhale a bemused sigh. That might have been our future. Just thinking about it was so frustrating, I started chewing on my lip again.

"…Algard…"

Could his true desire have been to find himself in the same position that I occupied now? To be able to worry about his sister, to support her, to share in her joys and pains?

Sadly, he couldn't have hoped for such a thing. Even if he had, it would never have been permitted. After all, Lady Anis was a heretic—and the walls of heresy were impassable, no matter how wonderful her ideas were. I never thought I would find myself resenting the system as I did now.

"…Ngh…" A moan dragged me from my thoughts.

"…Lady Anis?" I called back.

I thought that she must have woken up, but it turned out that she was talking in her sleep. I sighed in relief.

Then, her next words caught me off guard.

"…I'm sorry…Allie…"

She winced as tears rolled down her face.

"…Lady Anis."

I stroked her cheek with a finger. She was still deep in sleep, and there was nothing to suggest that she was waking up. I wiped the tears from her face with my fingertips.

Leaning over her, I placed a hand by her side and stared down from above. Her brow was slightly furrowed, probably from a fretful dream.

I pressed my lips against her eyelid in a kiss of prayer. It had a slight tang, mildly salty from her tears.

"…Sleep well, Lady Anis."

What would happen to us all now? There was no telling what the future might hold. There were still a great many problems unresolved, and there would undoubtedly be many more hardships awaiting her up ahead. Every single time she went down that road, she ended up getting hurt—and yet she was still desperate to forge on, to face it without flinching.

"…I'll be here, by your side."

All I wanted was to protect her. That wasn't just my own wish

—I had been entrusted with it by another, too.

I was free, free to fly away as far as I wanted. But for now, I wanted to rest my wings.

The day would come when it was time for me to leave—but until then, I wished for nothing more than for her to sleep well.

At least in your dreams, be safe.

* * *

The disinheritance of Prince Algard Von Palettia…

Chroniclers say that the series of tumultuous events that arose from the annulment of his betrothal to Lady Euphyllia Magenta were a turning point in the history of the Kingdom of Palettia.

The disowning of the prince left only one individual in the direct royal bloodline to succeed to the throne, and the scandalous abuse of power by the Ministry of the Arcane shook the realm greatly.

The future of the Kingdom of Palettia, which people had once feared to be edging toward decline, had been shown a new path by two young ladies: Anisphia Wynn Palettia, a princess at the forefront of her era, yet widely regarded as a heretic, and Euphyllia Magenta, the prestigious ducal daughter proclaimed as the greatest of geniuses.

But this tale was of the joys and sorrows of a brother and a sister who had long been at odds with one another, and that…well, that is another story.

Thank you so much for purchasing the second volume of *The Magical Revolution of the Reincarnated Princess and the Genius Young Lady*. It's Piero Karasu here.

I'm overjoyed to be able to get the second volume out to you all so soon after the first one. I'd like to thank everyone who picked up a copy.

Now then, if the first volume served as an opening to the first arc, this second one is meant to conclude it.

We've been able to delve into the mysteries surrounding Lainie, which we didn't get a chance to properly explore last time, along with Algard's dark intentions.

When I began serializing this tale online, I was a little worried about how to handle these two characters. There was a very real possibility that Algard would lose his life in his confrontation with Anisphia. It was also possible that Lainie was going to perish in the course of this tragedy. As I developed them both, I kept searching for the right way to end the story, and eventually I arrived at the conclusion we find here.

While the first volume was intended to depict Anisphia's bright and joyous character, the goal of this second one was to portray the reactions of the people around her and the wider effects of her actions.

A reincarnated individual with knowledge of an advanced civilization could, if they made use of that information, have a great impact on the world. And depending on how they did so, they could bring about both positive and negative changes.

In the first volume, I wanted to emphasize the positive changes that Anisphia was helping to usher in, but it wasn't quite as easy as it sounds.

There were people whose lives had been saved thanks to her actions, but there were also those who suffered. If there were people who supported her endeavors, there were just as many who denounced them. Those who have read the web version will probably have stopped for a second, wondering whether Tilty wasn't part of the latter group.

As the author of this story, I would be overjoyed if the characters who appear in this tale managed to touch your heart in some small way.

Once again, Yuri Kisaragi's beautiful illustrations have added extra depth to the scenes, and I'm very happy to have been able to publish this tale that I've poured my heart into in book form.

The story that began with the dissolution of a royal engagement has concluded by exposing the conspiracy behind that shocking turn of affairs, but the tale doesn't end here. I'll leave for now with a wish and a hope that I'll be able to get the next volume out to you all soon. Once again, thank you all so much!

Piero Karasu

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